

30 Years of Hampshire Fare: Championing Local

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.

Matt: Hello and welcome to a special Hampshire HistBites podcast. I'm Matt Liversedge and this episode will be celebrating an anniversary. Hampshire Fare is 30 years old in 2021.

Many of you will have seen Hampshire Fare's logo on websites, signs and produce across the county, but who are they? And what do they do? I'm joined today by Hampshire Fare commercial manager, Tracy Nash who's going to tell us a bit more about some of the great work Hampshire Fare has been doing over the years.

Happy anniversary, Tracy. What's it all about?

Tracy: Hello there, Matt. Thanks for having me today. So what is Hampshire Fare all about? Well, basically back in 1991, a sheep farmer, a pig farmer, and a watercress producer all got together and formed this sort of mini group, rural farming in Hampshire and, lucky for them, someone within Hampshire County Council saw that they were forming this group and thought, right. Okay, how can we help support them and fund them and develop this into a group for local producers to connect with each other, really. And so that was 30 odd years ago and at a time, really, when local food wasn't as big as what it is now.

So, the push over the last 30 years, it's been quite an incredible journey with this Hampshire Fare as a membership organization growing to the point where today it's actually got all the local producers, food, drink and also products like beauty products, you know, balms for your skin made out of honey. So we call them craft members, I suppose. and today, you know, the group is routes to market. So we've got all the producers and we've got the people that sell the produce, all the farm shops and local independent village stores. And then we've got the chefs, and the establishments that use the produce in their menus.

And this could be something from say a small Deli Cafe right up to a five star hotel. So, we're really proud of that journey. we don't sadly get the funding like we used to. Over the past four years, the journey has been well, five years, has been to be more self-sustainable, which luckily I can say we are. Through our membership fees and particular sponsors that support us going forward without them, we couldn't do all the proactive work that we do so we're really grateful for them too.

Matt: Wow. That is a lot of different producers. who do you particularly love? Is there Oh, I shouldn't say that. Should I? 'Cause there's probably so many. you don't want to have some favoritism do you? What is popular at the moment?

Tracy: Oh, wow. Okay. So strawberries of course are really popular. And the thing is, people won't know this, but strawberries were commercially produced in the 1900s in Hampshire. So they've been part of our heritage for absolutely years. In the 1880s, it was very small scale. And then this little sort of group, the Swanwick and District Fruit Growers Association formed in the 1900s and so strawberries were commercially grown here and taken on the trains, off to everywhere. Today you know, strawberry growing is still really big. we've still got a couple of key growers here so much so that we've got like New Forest Fruit. Now 90% of their strawberries are actually grown in the tabletop system. Now, what is the tabletop system? Well, it means that they are grown waist height so that the pickers don't have to have back-breaking picking, it's much better for the staff, on the tabletop system and this grower of ours, they're down in the New Forest, they also grow asparagus. In fact, they grow the earliest asparagus in the UK. So it comes out in February and they grow blueberries and raspberries. But the strawberries that they grow out of Hampshire this year out of the New Forest would be over 4,000 tons. So it's quite a substantial -

Matt: wow.

Tracy: Yeah, it's quite a substantial industry. I mean, Hampshire, wasn't known as a soft fruit sort of county, of old but now we're certainly producing some great strawberries that are super sweet. and they're on the menus, you know, at all the restaurants and they're at all the outlets ready for sale. Plus going a lot further afield to some of the biggest market retailers as well. So that's a great success story.

We've also got obviously Blackmore Estate which is 1920s that was formed, mainly apples in those days, like over 50 different varieties of apples, but they now produce cherries, as well as pears so yeah, fruit is big, definitely.

The other sort -

Matt: So every time you're tucking into those strawberries, who knows, they might well be a Hampshire strawberry.

Tracy: They may well be. It's one of our really lovely British products so - really proud of those. So one of the other heritage products of Hampshire has to be the trout. The farming of trout for the table actually began in Britain in the 1960s and the fish farming grew rapidly from the second half of the 1970s. So my best description of this success story, is that we've gone from a very seventies type fish to something that is just on the plate everywhere. Over the last five years, the success of the Hampshire trout has just been amazing. The chalk stream waters obviously of the Test enabled the trout to grow really clean, Chalkstream feeds have managed to produce a trout that's the size of salmon in some cases, which is really great for chefs because they obviously can do quite a lot with it. And over the last sort of five years, the Hampshire trout is a really great story. When the cruise ships are operating, it's going out there around the world, obviously frozen, and all the restaurants

and pubs have embraced it. So you can get hot smoked trout, cold smoked trout, and it's just complete quality. A lot of the London restaurants are using it. So, it's lovely to know that that is coming out of Hampshire.

Matt: And one of the good things that goes with trout would be a really good quality English sparkling. I should imagine.

Tracy: Absolutely. I mean, British sparkling wine, the popularity of it is huge. And it's risen greatly, over the last few years, but, do people know that the first commercial vineyard in the UK was here in Hampshire in 1952 at Hambledon? And, since then the popularity and actually the conditions of Hampshire have allowed a lot of vineyards to create some really top award-winning wine. So we have a, geology of chalk in Hampshire, which is actually the same chalk that goes right down to the Champagne region in France. So coupled with our climate, it enables us to grow some really good wine. We don't just grow sparkling wine either. We actually produce some great stills and even a red wine out of Hampshire. I mean, Hampshire Fare has, what? some 14 members that are all vineyards. So the actual industry of Hampshire wine, is huge it's massive, and it's growing substantially.

Matt: We can give some of that champagne regions a run for their money, I think can't we.

Tracy: Some of that champagne region have actually got land in Hampshire growing their own wine here we've got other counties and actually other countries grow vines in Hampshire. So, yeah, it's brilliant. It's absolutely amazing. And can I just say, you know, I started off with that 1952 first commercial vineyard, here in Hampshire, Hambledon. If we fast forward to 2022, there will actually be a wine tourism centre that is currently being built at Hambledon vineyard. You can wine and dine in the vineyards, book a table actually sat in the vineyards and have some lovely local cheeses, so we're talking about a really interesting journey there, and the place will be amazing,

Matt: Any excuse to go and see a vineyard and taste some wine is absolutely fine by me.

Tracy: Absolutely the same. Yeah. You can dine there and have a wedding there

Matt: So it's very easy for us to be able to talk about all the fantastic produce across Hampshire, what has Hampshire Fare done in terms of some of the initiatives that have been run and how has that helped the produce and the producers across the county?

Tracy: Yeah, sure. So in the last 10 years we've done a spectacular project with funding from the Prince's Countryside Fund and it was amazing to think that we did that in 2011, we took a two year project called Preserve the Hampshire Hog and basically what this was we were training pig farmers and butchers to learn the art of Charcuterie. So it's a very hands-on two year project where they were taught basically how to get more from the pig, because obviously with pork pig farming it's not very profitable to be honest. So this project was really of its time, I think, and, great timing because that project, the outcome of that, we had the Hampshire Charcuterie as an actual logo produced, with a website supporting these charcuterie producers. And we got to go to Clarence House and meet his Royal Highness Prince Charles, myself and two pig farmers, Parsonage Farm and Greenfield Pork, Martin,

and Sarah from Parsonage. And it was just an honour to be there, to have funding to do a project that was so worthwhile and the outcome of it and the legacy of it still continues.

So we've got a handful of our actual original producers still producing charcuterie and the demand for charcuterie over the last five years—British charcuterie—has just risen. I think Hampshire Fare probably gets an email once a week about Hampshire charcuterie you know, can you put me in contact? I'd like to buy some etc. So I think one of the issues we may have for the future is that we don't have enough and the demand is so high, which is actually a nice problem to have.

Matt: That's a very nice problem to have. So we can't do anything at the moment without mentioning it at some point. COVID is still a thing, is clearly going to be affecting a lot of the producers across the county. How has it looked from a Hampshire Fare point of view, in terms of affecting the producers and the suppliers?

Tracy: It's a really interesting one, that one, because obviously when it first happened, it was quite a big shock. but our producers adapted quickly. At the start, the loss of hospitality channels, for routes to market, they had to adapt pretty swift. What we saw though was a rise in demand from our local independent retail offerings. So the demand for local produce went sky high and still is. Where people tend to shop in smaller shops you know, in their local butchers, in their local greengrocers and their local farm shop, we found that the surge in demand has meant that you can even go into one of our butchers now and there's a full on deli there, with your smoked trout and with your cheese.

The other thing producers had to obviously develop was their own websites. I remember speaking to one of our cheese makers who in the past, to be honest, would never, ever have considered selling cheese online. and, through COVID obviously a lot of our producers were selling direct. So they had to get up to speed with technology, adapt their websites to have portals to sell from—and especially when we were on total lockdown. There's a lot of success stories that have come out of this terrible time. They've learned to adapt, and probably their businesses actually are much slicker than what they were before, they're more focused.

Event activity has been obviously off limits for quite some time now, so their online sales and the surge in demand for local, from retail has filled that gap. And obviously with hospitality back on now, they're really busy,

Matt: So there are some successes over the last a year. That sounds fantastic.

Tracy: Well, it's good to know that, if you're adaptable, when you look at something, then it can work and, and it can actually be better for the future for the business. And we've got a lot of new producers that are joining us at the moment, which is just fantastic, it's great to know that as a food group, Hampshire Fare was there, every day, holding hands, showing them how to get through COVID times, avenues to go for grants and things like that. And, yeah, I just think they really respected that help to be honest, through the tricky times, you know. It's easy to be good when everything is good.

Matt: So Hampshire Fare are really good at giving you that advice rather than just that element of networking? You guys are really good at helping those businesses out with that element of the, finance, I suppose?

Tracy: In terms of the finance and the advice, what we're really good at, we're still obviously connected and got good relationships with Hampshire County Council, so, that's really valuable and obviously Tourism Hampshire, and what we pull from the local councils is all the information that we need to then relay to our members.

So, I'm no expert in finance, but I know people that are, I'm no expert in commercial property, but we had a producer that wanted to move and he was having difficulty finding a location, particularly near Winchester. And so we pooled our resources together and found a whole list of places that were possibilities, and he's moved in. So, yeah, we do a lot behind the scenes that obviously the general public don't see, but businesses join us. We're not just about obviously shouting about supporting local producers of food and drink. We're about actually helping them to develop and networks that we do are really helpful to both parties. So at the last network we had, a trout pate producer who is now going to be in the kitchens at one of our pub groups. We've got a Gin that met a deli that's now stocking her gin. So, I think we do a lot of connecting up, both on the selling routes to market side of things, as well as obviously all the promotion that we do to the consumer.

Matt: And for 30 years! Can you make plans at the end of COVID?

Tracy: Yeah, it's been really tricky to make plans for our 30th anniversary. And last year was the 20th anniversary of Hampshire Food Festival in the month of July. So it's been tough, you know, because we want to do this big all singing dancing festival dinner, but we've kind of held off that for the moment because everyone is so busy with obviously trying to make business again, but what we're doing for our 30th is a couple of really positive things. We've just launched a collection of four hampers that are the Hampshire Fare 30th anniversary hampers, we're using our hamper member, New Forest Hampers to deliver these, we've called them the Beaulieu¹, the Test, the Meon and the Hamble. So they're all names of rivers in Hampshire, so we're really proud to be able to offer totally all Hampshire Fare members' products within hampers. It's good for the producers that are already in these hamper boxes, but it's also good for new producers coming on board and existing ones to introduce them to this New Forest Hampers so that they can may be included in another one. We're all about including as many people as possible into that.

We're also planning for September to do something for children so we developed this 30th anniversary crest, which an illustrator developed for us and it's got all produce on it and animals and what we thought would be nice is to turn it black and white so that the children, the schools, could colour the crest and then we'll host a competition with different age groups, to offer some prizes perhaps for a family to go out for a meal at one of our restaurants. That's a couple of the things we've got planned for this year.

1 Pronounced Bewly

Matt: And in case anybody missed that, where can we get those hampers?

Tracy: Ah, you can get those hampers through newforesthamperscompany.com just go to Hampshire Fare website and there's a whole piece on there as well. And you can also actually download our 30th anniversary year local produce guide book. which has everywhere to eat local, everywhere to buy local and all the local producers included within it. So it's a really good little book that one.

Matt: I'm a new producer. I've got a fantastic new Hampshire product. and I'm not sure how to get in contact with people. I don't know what to do with it. I don't know how to expand. How do I get involved with Hampshire Fare?

Tracy: Okay. So the best thing to do is either give us a call or contact us through our website or email info@hampshirefare.co.uk. and we'll have a conversation with that producer to find out what they're doing. We've just had an inquiry from an egg producer, who's brand new to us. so we'll go through what we actually do, what we can do for them.

First of all, we'll ask the questions with that producer:- where they want to take their product and this is really important because we've got producers of all different sizes with all different needs. So some want to take on the world and export to America and Australia. Some want to stay within the UK, but go in every farm shop, say, in the UK, others want to actually keep it really close and just do local events and sell direct. So I think the biggest question for that producer is where do you want to take your products? Because we can help with all sides of that.

Matt: Fantastic. So it's just limited by your own imagination.

Tracy: Yes, it really is 'cause we have such a vast amount of contacts and like nearly 400 members working with us as well as our partners. So it's a great big family. That's what it is. It's a 30 year family. and I'm really proud to have been part of that for the last nine years. So, yeah, it's great. Everyone is really friendly within Hampshire Fare and they love working with each other and supporting each other. So, that kind of makes our job a lot easier.

Matt: How long have you been involved in Hampshire Fare?

Tracy: Oh, so I joined Hampshire Fare in 2013, completed that Hampshire Charcuterie project and bringing back the great Hampshire sausage and pie competition. So it was quite a big, big, first year to be honest. Hampshire Fare is very different now. I was talking to Davina Tibbetts who's a home economist who has been with Hampshire Fare following it since the early days. In fact, Davina was very much involved in the first Hampshire Food Festival at the Guildhall Winchester. She brought in Sophie Grigson and Mary Berry when she wasn't as obviously famous as what she is now. it's quite interesting talking to Davina because she said the best way I can describe Hampshire Fare then and now is that it was like a tiny little acorn seed idea that grew into a great big oak tree but now has all these branches that are really spreading out and they're really all good branches for local producers, it's so successful. And she said, I'm so proud to still be involved with Hampshire Fare and I thought, oh, do you know what? That's so lovely to hear Hampshire Fare described in that way. makes me very proud to have been involved with that,

Matt: Where do you think that oak tree continues to grow for Hampshire Fare?

Tracy: I think that oak tree gets absolutely huge, really. the drive towards using locally sourced produce is huge, and will continue to grow. It's good for the local economy, it's good for sustainability, it's good for communities. and it has a very good feel-good factor about it as well.

I think we'll see a lot more development going towards educating our little ones, into where their food comes from. It's something that's very close to my heart and something we've touched on over the last five years with doing positive things with schools, taking producers into schools. I don't know if it will be an oak tree. It might be! Quite a few oak trees joined together—let's hope anyway!

Matt: So Hampshire Fare's clearly doing a great job, but why should we buy local?

Tracy: There's a lot of angles to why we should buy local. Firstly, you're cutting down on food miles by buying something that's been produced locally, why should you buy something out of season as well? But there's other reasons to buying local. You're supporting local businesses and these are the businesses that will support the communities which you live in. From that side of things from an economic side, not to mention the quality. Animal welfare is extremely high, not just in Hampshire, but in the UK. An example is we're being told to eat less meat. Well, that's fine, but just eat better quality meat, smaller amounts, but better quality. And that's what a local producer is presenting to you, a better quality product in season, that's supporting the local economy and obviously cutting down on ridiculous food miles.

I think there's a really strong angle towards supporting and buying local produce in terms of your mindset. If you go out to a local farmer's market, you're actually getting to engage with the person that's producing that product and that passion that you'll get from buying that chunk of local cheese, it's a feel-good factor, I think that's completely priceless. And obviously if you shop in your little local smaller shop, the community atmosphere from that shop is all what we need. It's been what's kept people going over this past, pandemic era, and it will continue, those people have been there when things have been really tough. And that community building spirit, going into your local butchers not only have you got obviously quality local produce in there, but you've got banter and you've got people who actually care about you. It's not just like going shopping in a faceless place. It's actually like an experience as well.

And I think that's something that perhaps is overlooked in buying locally, and it's something that's really important for us all

Matt: So many benefits and one of them being good for your mental health as well? I think that's fantastic. Tracy, Thank you for talking to us today.

Tracy: Thank you for having me. It's been great.

Matt: You're very welcome. I'm Matt Liversedge and this has been a Hampshire HistBites episode as part of the Winchester Heritage Open Days. If you'd like to hear more episodes,

be part of Heritage Open Days, or be involved with HistBites head over to our website at winchesterheritageopendays.org to find out more.

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, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.