

# Taking history to a new audience



Recording session for an Hampshire History Trust HistBite

## The new horizons for Hampshire historians

Community involvement in the rich heritage of the county is fueling an ambitious new charity inspired by 'open days', writes Barry Shurlock

A MOVEMENT that started in Europe, was piloted in 1992 by local historian Lesley Burton and the Gosport Society has mushroomed nationally and led ultimately to the launch in Winchester of a new organization, the Hampshire History Trust (HHT).

Spearheaded by Nicky Gottlieb and Becky Brown, it started five years ago as the Winchester Heritage Open Day (actually growing to 10 days), which was so successful that it has now triggered a much more ambitious plan to create a county-wide, history-based organization.

HODs originally began by offering free visits to places that people might not normally visit – such as museums and galleries – and others that are not normally open. The aim was to showcase and present new ideas to communities, so, anyone could be a 'tourist for a day'. Since then, it has developed into much more, with guided walks and visits, talks, exhibitions, workshops, and children's activities.

A central team led by the National Trust in London represents HODs throughout England and provides functions, including promotion, advice, insurance, a national directory and collection of data ([www.heritageopendays.org.uk](http://www.heritageopendays.org.uk)).

In 2019, there were more than 22,000 visits to Winchester HODs and last year with the challenges of Covid-19 there were 13,000 hits on its website and 12,000 visits to associated films, podcasts and live-streamed events. Whilst many participants were from Winchester itself, there were others from elsewhere, including 6% from overseas, especially the USA.

Winchester HODs also scored on social media with a key indicator –

the 'e-letter open rate' – of 63%, three times the national average. Website content also fared well, with 92% of visitors judging it 'engaging, informative and entertaining'.

Surveys show that HODs can take history and heritage to a new audience, with a substantial number of participants deciding to visit a gallery or museum again or take up a new interest.

From small beginnings, Winchester HODs has therefore been a huge success, supported by a variety of organisations, including the Hampshire County Council, Winchester City Council, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Winchester College, City of Winchester Trust, Winchester BID and the University of Winchester.

The new organization HHT is now aiming to take things further by engaging the whole county in history of all kinds. The plan is to engage communities by being 'inclusive, not exclusive', and 'making history alive for everyone'. Involvement of students from the University of Winchester and the financial support of Winchester College and Winchester BID have been vital to HODs and are expected to continue.

One of its major aims is to develop year-round 'low-cost history and heritage educational events', starting with HistBites, a series of 44 podcasts spread over the four seasons. Live talks and interviews are pre-recorded and produced with accompanying notes and transcripts.

They cover a wide variety of subjects and are all posted online (<https://hampshirehistorytrust.com/>, and <https://histbites.buzzsprout.com/>). There are

HistBites on historic graffiti in the cathedral, King Alfred Buses, how Hampshire partied at the end of WWII, Empress Matilda's 'last stand', 'Winchester Geese' (a euphemism for prostitutes in the Southwark area of London) and much else.

All HistBites can be enjoyed on any one of about 20 podcast channels, including Spotify, Apple and Google. New productions are released online at 11am on Wednesdays and broadcast on Winchester Radio 94.7 FM the following Friday at 11am with a repeat on Sunday 9am.

Forthcoming subjects include an exploration of the archives of the St Swithun's School, travel tales from John Pilkington, including one on the Silk Road and Whitchurch Silk Mill, the Völsunga Saga and Sigmund and the Wolf (from the Old Norse classic), and Florence Nightingale and Romsey Abbey. And HHT is keen to hear via its website from any individuals and organisations with other new ideas.

One of the main supporters for HODs from the beginning was Winchester College, whose headmaster Dr Tim Hands was keen to involve the school. But anyone can get involved – there have been individuals with interesting houses, postcard collectors, local history groups and many others with a story to tell.

HHT is run by trustees from many walks of life – including heritage, public service, education, financial services, photography and theatre – together with university students and other volunteers. Nicky has a degree in the History of Fine and Decorative Arts and Becky a background in health service



Fort Brockhurst, Gosport, an 1850s 'Palmerston Fort' open during HODs. Image: The Gosport Society



'Living history' in Winchester during previous HODs

management and management consultancy.

The future plan is to engage a manager and engineer the scheme to become a major player in county-wide history. Experience with Winchester HODs has already led to contact with organisations in other places – including Southampton, Gosport, Basingstoke, Petersfield, Romsey, Alresford and Hursley. The expectation is that this will expand, especially when a 'blue plaque' scheme and history festival are introduced and HODs expanded.

A major challenge for HHT will be to spread its activities across the county and span a spectrum of historical activities that encompasses tourist attractions, local history, museums, schools and academia.

Its natural home is at the 'visits end' of the scale. In other areas, it risks adding to an already crowded network of information sources. These include the well-established sites of such organisations as the Hampshire Field Club, Hampshire Cultural Trust, Hampshire Record Office, Hampshire Archives Trust, Hampshire Genealogical Society and others.

HHT aims to work with these organisations in a collaborative way that brings a fresh approach to the sharing of historical information within communities.

What is clear is that traditional history based on print is already being rapidly overtaken by digital products and only time will show which will thrive. Researching ideas, writing and collecting images are central to any history project. Thereafter, the author must decide whether to mount an exhibition, give a talk or post the results on an e-book, a blog, a podcast, or a



Previous Winchester HODs open for business in the Great Hall. Nicky Gottlieb on the left

downloadable PDF – or even just print it.

Whatever the eventual product if it is entirely digital there are many who believe that, in addition, it is sensible to print a few copies, as they may well be the only product that in the long term survives.

As a footnote, Gosport's proud claim to have been the first place to mount an HOD in England in 1992 is challenged by Berwick-upon-Tweed, who held a Doors Open Day the previous year. And even that can be challenged within the UK, as Glasgow held one in 1990. The national HODs website seems content to say that the scheme started in 1994. More 'fuzzy news' than 'fake news'.

For more on Hampshire, visit: [www.hampshirearchivetrust.co.uk](http://www.hampshirearchivetrust.co.uk).

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