

## Re-discovering our ancient and traditional heritage crafts

**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.

**Charlotte:** I will be interviewing BBC's Victorian Farm presenter and author of *Cræft: An Inquiry into the Origins of Crafts*, Alex Langlands. Thank you for joining me, Alex. So Alex is currently a lecturer in medieval history, archaeology and heritage at Swansea University, he's also patron of the Heritage Crafts Association.

So maybe we should start with you telling us about your book *Cræft* and letting us know what inspired you to write this book?

**Alex:** Well, that book came out of about 15 years of doing three things. I mean, you mentioned Victorian Farm there, before we made Victorian Farm we made a series called Tales from the Green Valley. And then we went on to make Edwardian Farm after Victorian Farm and Wartime Farm. And then I kind of called time on my involvement in the enterprise. So that was four years spent kind of immersed in the past. Some people say, 'Oh, he's a bit of a method archaeologist.' I'd studied archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology. I did a BA and MA there in medieval archaeology, and then I did a world archaeology MA, which is a lot more theoretical. And then I went to work as a commercial archaeologist for seven years. And commercial archaeology is basically about just going from trench to trench, digging all sorts of amazing and wonderful things. And I think I've just got a little bit desensitized to just how fabulous archaeology is. When you first start in archaeology and you get a skeleton, you're like, 'Oh my God, it's the most amazing thing in the world.' You start really slowly excavating it. And then, sort of seven years later it's like, 'Oh no, not another skelly' kind of thing. And that was the point at which I was like, 'Okay, I need to do something a little bit different.' And I'd always been quite hands on anyway. My dad was a builder, so I used to do a lot of work for him. So the opportunity came up to work on a television program.

So got this archaeological background, and then at least four years spent immersed in the practice of actually running historic landscapes and then ran a small holding with bees, chickens, and growing all my own vegetables and everything, and doing crafts myself. So all of those things combined for me to have some thoughts of ideas that they kind of wanted to get across around the idea of craft and what crafting was. So it's a kind of discussion on craft and kind of what I wanted to do was connect with this idea of intangible heritage that too often we fetishise the craft object without thinking about how the object came about, how it was used, and then how it was disposed of. And that's something I'm very interested in as an environmentalist, how we engage with nature and the relationship past societies' have had with nature.

**Charlotte:** So when you were researching your books, you had a very hands on approach. Which particular crafts that you researched did you find was the most interesting?

**Alex:** Well, I've been very lucky to have had the opportunity, not just through the television series, but also through my own interest, to engage in a range of different crafts. I think one of my skills is doing stuff on time to budget and with whatever resources are there. And I do think there's an element of craft there, but the one craft that I really got into was basket making.

And I think one of the reasons why is because, and this is going to sound like I'm really tight-fisted, is because I didn't have to go and spend loads of money to get started. The tools are really basic and the materials are even more basic. And I started gravitating towards one particular side of basket making. And one of the reasons I did this is because I was really captivated by the idea of human societies, using materials, those that are immediately around them, to enhance and facilitate their lives. And that's sort of something I'm really, really interested in this a sort of proximity of those natural materials, because we live in a world now, where you could decorate your house with items bought from all over the world. And we wouldn't think twice about it.

I'm sort of interested in how we can enhance and furnish our lives, using materials that are most close to us. And one of the things I started working with is bramble, because bramble grows pretty much everywhere. It's a bit of a nuisance and farmers don't like it because it can creep into fields. But actually it's a hard wood and bramble cane, which can be extracted from the bramble plant with a degree of skill, can be used for all sorts of crafts. And that's what I started working with. The cane that is used to bind together in the technique known as lip work, a grass here. This is a Cocksfoot Grass, and you can find areas that aren't grazed where this stuff grows in abundance. This stuff I cut from roadside verge in North Wiltshire, and it's brilliant. And of course together, bramble cane, this real nuisance plant and this grass, which would otherwise just rot and turn to nothing, can be used to make a really rather perfect basket. And I'm really interested in that because that basket kept dry even though it's made with a straw and bramble cane, you keep that dry, you keep it in your house, they'll stay perfectly intact for as long as you need to use them. And I like that idea that actually I could order something up on Amazon Prime, which would arrive incredibly cheap, lots cheaper than that thing, has to be said, and that plastic basket would last how long? And then when it's got a bit pale and it's cracked, and it's broken, what would you do with that basket? You could recycle it, to be fair now potentially, or you could chuck it in the sea. I'm not advocating that at all, but that's what happens with our plastic. Whereas, I'd like to think that basket, what's happened is a raw material, that's growing very local to me, and when that basket does finally reach the end of its days, I can put it at the back of the garden, it will rot back to the earth. That is what I'm really, really interested in is how we can take that approach to having managed natural resources, the natural world, how we furnish our lives and all sorts of wonderful things, how we spend some time in contemplation making something, which is good for us. Even if we feel a bit lonely when we're doing it, it's a relatively healthy thing to do. And then when we're done with it, we can discard it without impacting upon the future of the planet.

**Charlotte:** No, I think that's a really, really good concept. I mean, one of the reasons I particularly enjoyed this book, I don't know if it's just because, well, I really love heritage and I love finding out about traditional skills, I think they're really important. But my granddad was a joiner and a carpenter by trade. So I've sort of grown up with these individual little things around me. I mean, we have these wine mats that he made way before I was even here, and we still use them today. There's something more special when you make it, and I like the

individual-ness and the skill that go into crafts and that's one of the reasons I really liked this book, particularly, especially with the whole thing that's gone on with lockdown, everyone's sort of gone back to DIY.

Have you been able to get up to any other crafts during lockdown?

**Alex:** Yeah, I did it. So I've made another basket and I've made a series about basket making.

Because I had loads of television cancelled this summer, which was a real shame, I was going to be making another series of 'Digging Up Britain's Past'. But it freed up a lot of time for me because I'm not commuting, so I thought I'll make a basket. And then, of course, no sooner do I start pulling materials together, I thought: 'No, I know what I'll do. I'll film myself making a basket.' Five months later, I eventually finished the basket and film. And I think at some point I will get them out there. I go through all the tools, I go through how to work process the materials, and I sort of digress into some points of my past and history. And I actually talk about the historic importance of some of these things as well. And I'd like to think that hopefully people could watch this, it's about three hours long it's in 15-minute programmes. They'll see that actually they could make a basket and may get some pleasure out of doing that.

I think you're right about your grandfather being a joiner and you have all these wonderful things in your life that you cherish. And I think we are moving towards buying that one thing you need once and not having to buy it again. And that sometimes does require an investment upfront of finance to do that. Rather than buying things that maybe don't last quite as long and you need to replace them. I really like what's happening, this sort of craft revolution, and lots of people are making wonderful objects. And if you go to craft fairs, you can buy some amazing stuff. But I do think we need to think about the economics a bit as well. And that actually is a lot of these things are only affordable to a certain section of society. And I think one of the things that we really need to do is to look at hidden nature. I think that's one of the things that I find quite interesting.

People drive down to a scenic spot in the landscape, they get out of their car in their designer outdoor gear with their dog and they walk around it and there we go, job done back in the car and off they go. And I actually think a lot of people would like to drive down there, get out of the car, be given some tools, traipse off to work on a bit of hedging, to dig a ditch, to cut back some grass and brush, to engage in that landscape in a meaningful way, and give people who are kind of locked down or in confined urban spaces, the opportunity to have a role and function in the wider landscape.

**Charlotte:** I really agree with that. I don't think we understand how important the environment is to us. And I think it's something that we overlook in society. It's really nice that potentially after all of this has happened, people be more interested to learn or experience the natural heritage and traditional craft. So along with basket making, what other sort of traditional crafts would you suggest to someone like me who is not really that very good with DIY?

**Alex:** The kind of things obviously you can do in and around the house, a very cramped space, cooking is one of them. And I think the baking revolution in part is about that people want to have a book in front of them and they want to have ingredients and they want to feel something and they want to engage with the world. They want to feel the world and they want to grow a knowledge around properties and materials. The other kind of things you could do

is whittling, stick whittling. I've got a little bit of rosewood here. But of course that's just the beginning of the craft journey, because then what you want is to use it to crochet something.

So you need some material to crochet with. Now you can use wool, you can spin that. So you've got basically a yarn there, and you can spin that using a drop spindle. Had them in the Neolithic, had them right up into the early medieval period. And then once you've got that, so you've got your cord. You can then set about making yourself basket, bag, some kind of very, very coarse cloak. If you felt like you needed to punish yourself. But I think the point about some of those crafts is that a lot of that stuff is just lying around, outside and in hedge rows. Obviously, permissions for taking anything from any wild space, it's a given you need to have those permissions.

Look, here's another one of my recent projects is, this is a different type of rosewood and these are rosewood skewers. The only thing about rosewood, unlike bramble, it's very, very stiff. Now, what could you use these for? Well, back in the past, you'd get opportunities for fresh fish, and that would be at certain times of the year. So I know when I was a kid down on the Sussex coast, I lived right on the seaside actually. And when the mackerel run was coming through, mum used to send us out with a few quid and we'd go, and the fishermen there, we'd buy a few mackerel off the fishermen. And the mackerel run would last maybe five, six, seven days, something like that. And they'll all be out there catching them. So, you know, if you're exploiting fish seasonally, you want to get as many mackerel as you possibly can. But what do you do with them? They can't eat them all in one go, and they're certainly not gonna keep, and cause back in the Neolithic, you didn't have freezers.

So you would smoke them and you would cure them. And of course, that's where your skewers come in handy because what you can do is you can slice them down the middle, open them up and use the skewers to truss them. And you do that so that they're nice and thin, as thin as you could possibly get them, they're more likely to cure more effectively. And that's just come from some rosewood that I cut from my hedgerow. It's a simple craft that you can then use. And today, where would you get that kind of thing from? Well, you'll probably go to a supermarket and buy bamboo skewers, from somewhere across the other side of the planet. Which at great expense to the planet, have been transported all the way here so you can have a fancy barbecue with some nice trussed mackerel.

**Charlotte:** I think with climate change being made more aware to us, perhaps, the fact that through lockdown, obviously all the carbon emissions came down. And I just thought that was wonderful, but we don't really think about the carbon footprint on a particular item. I think that's brilliant that, through this book, being made more aware that we can resource them closer to home. So earlier, just before we started this recording, we were talking about the rewilding of places. So could I just get your views on that? The importance of it or the potential issues regarding it?

**Alex:** I've always, I've been an environmentalist, actually a member of the Green Party since 2005. And I think biodiversity is one of the key things we need to address in our immediate landscape. We are standing on the brink of a collapse and the crisis, I think will put the COVID-19 crisis into perspective. And again, it will be those in society globally, without the funds, the resources and the opportunities who suffer most. We mustn't lose sight of that objective here. And being a member of the Green Party isn't just about wearing a pair of sandals and strutting around with a banner and being a hippie. It is about an impending crisis. It is about doom and all of the charts are saying that and all of the world leaders – apart from a handful of rogues – all accept that we have a major issue on our hands. So I don't want to be

conceited about the sort of COVID-19 crisis here. It's undoubtedly an immediate thing that we have to deal with. But I think there is a chance here to look at some of the good that may have come out of that in terms of different ways of working and ways that are more sustainable for the planet. So I think that's an important thing that's happening.

What are we doing about biodiversity at the local level? The rewilding thing, I get the idea. I like what people try to do with that. I'm an archaeologist, but foremost historian. When we stick the re- in front of any word, we immediately create problems. Often we set about re-enactment and actually this is something that's been published by academics is re-enactment is not really a re-enactment, it's enactment of what we think the past looked like. And I think you've got the same problems with rewilding is re-. Okay, what are we going back to? Are we going back to 1,200 AD? 1,200 BC? 3,000 BC? 5,000 BC? When do we go back to, how do we design that? And I think the issue with that re- element is that it exposes in that philosophy that in some ways humankind is separate from nature. The re- in rewilding perpetuates this idea that humankind is separate from nature. And maybe humankind will end up growing all its food in factories and just walking around on tarmac paths and looking at pictures of trees rather than actually being part of nature.

But I still have the ambition to see us as a species situated within the natural world and taking care of the natural world. I mean, I've been reading some great stuff recently about European attitudes to what native Americans were doing in the northern half of America. They were looking for how they were harvesting wild rice. And they go along in on one of these canoes, and they had this sort of racket that knocks the wild rice off into a basket on the canoe. And they fill a basket up and off they go. And a lot of it, because it's not going in the basket, looks to the European mindset like so much rice is being wasted, it's just being knocked back into the water. Of course it is to grow next year, isn't it. So you actually sowing at the same time you go. And of course, the comment is that these indigenous people were only taking as much as they needed. So the whole mindset to how landscapes are managed, how nature is managed, is in part to blame for the crisis we are in. And we really need to start looking at indigenous societies and the way they've managed landscapes and learning those lessons.

And of course, that's again where archaeological practice can come in because archaeologists have the advantage of being able to go beyond living memory, time out of mind, as they say, and exploring the physical evidence for how past societies manage their landscapes. And this is not to say that indigenous people weren't at times prone to over exploitation, you know, there are excavations where the numbers of animal bones decreased in size and in quantities, which suggested that you've got a resource being overexploited. This does happen, but I think a whole bunch of wisdom can come out of understanding past society and looking at what they've done, detaching the romanticism from it, looking at the evidence and saying, 'Well, how can present day societies live in greater harmony with their landscape and with the hidden nature all around them.'

**Charlotte:** I think that's really interesting, especially the idea that obviously sustainability is something that's present in all cultures, how we all need to be so aware, just so we can continue. So going back to traditional crafts, what sort of traditional crafts do you find that were most beneficial to nature?

**Alex:** Things I've always really enjoyed doing, actually, is haymaking. Haymaking is the sort of craft that I somewhat romantically would like to see re-enacted in the British landscape as a celebration of the British landscape and of biomass.

**Charlotte:** But you're really passionate about sort of giving back to communities. I remember when previous to this interview, we were talking about your work with Swansea University. I think it was the Copperopolis, which is sort of placemaking, public engagement, heritage led regeneration of a heritage site, which has been derelict for quite a little while?

**Alex:** So Swansea at one point was producing vast amounts of copper for the rest of the world. But what do you use copper for? Well, if you think about industrial revolution is predicated on steam power and for steam, you need boilers. For boilers, you need copper. Swansea explodes and it's bringing in copper ores from all over the world. From South Australia to Chile and coal from the valleys, of course, coastal location. Part of the British Empire, really well-placed. And then by the time you get to the 1930s, the writing is really on the wall for these copper works. And what we see happen in the Lower Swansea Valley is it goes from being full of smelting houses, casting houses, chimneys, wharf buildings, rolling mills, all of those buildings, by the 1960s they're being demolished, as are all the big slagheaps.

And the people of Swansea, they live with that legacy really up until the present day. But what's happened recently and that's been an initiative that's been really driven by a Swansea council, the Welsh government, and Swansea University are proud to have been a part of it. There's been investment in what remains of some of those copper works buildings. And there's been engagement with the community because, I think one of the things I'm quite passionate about is the designation of heritage needs to be a democratic process. We need expertise, obviously, and we need stewardship, and we need guardians, and we need protection, statutory protection. But designation is something that we really need to see as something that is democratic.

What do buildings mean to people? And increasingly placemaking is driving the way we think about urban regeneration and economic generation. Place-making. I think COVID-19 as well is going to make us think even more critically about investing in the local and the super local. So placemaking agenda comes along. Well, what does place mean? And who decides that? And that is a really important question because you could take someone like me, someone white, middle class, I like to say lower-class origins, my family, but certainly with my education, quite middle-class. And I could come down here with my clipboard and say, 'You know, I know all about this stuff. This is what's important. This is the story.' And that's the way for quite a long time heritage has been designated, you know, white men in suits are very well-educated and we need to change that. And what's important in one part of the world may be unimportant in another part of the world. We need to have an ear for what the stories are, what the passions are, and how people want to connect with their place. Because that's what makes the heritage sustainable. So there's a twin challenge here about how we use industrial monuments and the industrial landscape to tell a story that people feel part of, we don't just hit them with 'The industrial revolution was brilliant. We did it first. There we go', because that's not people's connection with it.

And if anything, you talk to people in the Lower Swansea Valley who remember, or have relatives who've worked in there themselves, there's pride in there. About the work they did and their connection with it. But there is also some shame at the dereliction and there's some anger at the toxins and the poison that capitalism and the British Empire brought to the people of that part of the world. So it's a contested landscape and I've really enjoyed working in that situation. And if anyone is interested in it, we've got a YouTube channel called SU. So Swansea University Heritage, SU Heritage. Look us up and we've got some videos on there

where we've engaged with all different types of community groups and stakeholders. And I'm just asking that really open question, you know, what is this place? What does it mean to you? And hopefully that'll take the debate forward and it'll get some of the decision makers thinking about how we incorporate those ideas and things.

**Charlotte:** Yeah. I think we need to work on how we can make heritage more inclusive and I think that's really good that you covered that topic, particularly with Britain being such a diverse society as it is today. What sort of ways do you think that we can make heritage, history, archaeology more inclusive to these people that potentially don't recognise or associate with their own heritage?

**Alex:** Well, the answer to your question is to get more people involved. Let's try and communicate to them that actually the past, the total past, can be read and studied and observed in the world around you.

**Charlotte:** So my final question: Why is archaeology and heritage still so important in today's society and why do you still study it?

**Alex:** Well, I think we need to make it more important. I think we are suffering at the moment a little bit. We are slightly obsessed by STEM subjects. I don't doubt that we need to in Great Britain maintain the very, very highest standards of education around the STEM subjects. And I don't doubt that solving a lot of the world's problems that they won't come from advances made in STEM subjects. But we got to keep pace with everyone. And there's an element, I think, of – you can come up with the best bit of technology to solve a problem, but if you can't change people's minds and their value, it might never get implemented and you could go out there and say to people, 'Well, actually the best thing to do is to not science our way out of this situation, it's about just not buying anything you don't need.' Of course, economists are going to go, 'That's a nightmare', because it would lead to financial collapse, it would. And we're seeing it now. All those things that are non-essential are actually quite essential to our economic model. So it's about how you win that debate. And there will always be human issues around belief, around compassion and around understanding of our fellow mankind. That is one of the things I really worry about. And I see a lot on Twitter. I see a lot of people, some in very important positions, not using the evidence they're presenting in their Tweet in quite the way it should be. And I think that's the whole fake news thing is that there's a real danger.

One of the great things about history is critical analysis is like you get a text and you critique it. You don't take anything at face value. You critique everything. Okay. And some historians are better than others, but you critique absolutely everything. And I think we do need a generation of younger people coming through the door that can look at evidence, and can see how values and ideology are using evidence in a certain way and understand that. Because if we reduce the numbers of people that are doing those critical subjects and critical thinking around the humanities, we're at risk of producing a generation of people that are sold into STEM, are really easily sold into concepts and ideas, with dangerous ideas that are peddled on social media. But I think we just need to have some of that kind of critical analysis. So critical thinking is why I think archaeology, history and a critical understanding of our past will always have a part to play in society. And actually I think more so now than ever before.

**Charlotte:** I think that's a really good way of phrasing it. Thank you so much for taking part in my interview today. Really nice to talk about the nitty gritty of heritage, which is often

overlooked, to find out about traditional crafts and hidden nature and how we can help through traditional crafts or through a more sustainable approach. Thank you for joining us.

**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](http://www.winchesterheritageopendays.org), click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.