

The Local Strawberry Industry

9th June 2016 - Roy Underdown Pavilion

Well known local historian George Watts, who is from a strawberry growing family, gave an interesting illustrated talk about the history of the South Hampshire strawberry industry. Many of the Hamble's neighbouring villages were involved in this industry with it being a significant part of Titchfield, Warsash, Swanwick and Botley's economy.

George started by explaining the early history of strawberries which at that time were just wild and not cultivated. People started using them for their supposed medicinal properties and in Germany they were known as earth berries. In the early 16th century they became a market garden plant in Europe and a century later were grown in England on the outskirts of London.

Strawberries are recorded and illustrated in early documents produced by the monks and authors, such as William Shakespeare and Jane Austen, include them in their writings.

In the early 1800s the local commons were enclosed and some of the poor land was given free to the copyholders. This poor land was suitable for strawberry growing, particularly as the stony soil warmed up quickly and it exactly suited the shallow rooted strawberry plants. Also, the warm prevailing wind coming over the Solent and Hamble River reduced the risk of frosts in the critical weeks of flowering, so most of the Hampshire strawberry growing industry was focused between the Meon and Hamble rivers.

The enclosures coincided with the improvement of rail and road communications so the local farmers could supply fresh fruit to the growing towns. The Southampton to Portsmouth railway line via Botley and Fareham opened in 1841, thus enabling a great expansion of the local industry. George illustrated this by the expansion of grocers in Portsmouth, in 1847 there were just 24 but by 1875 this had increased to 123.

The construction of Netley to Fareham railway in the late 1880s and the opening of Swanwick station transformed the local industry. In the height of the strawberry season, growers' carts could be seen queuing up at Swanwick and Botley stations to be distributed all over the country. The strawberry carts were specially designed to give the strawberries a gentle ride and so were the rail wagons, with slatted windows and shelves inside, to allow air to circulate to keep the fruit in good condition.

There was a big boon before the First World War with up to 100,000 baskets of strawberries being loaded at Swanwick Station in a single day. During the 1913 season 3,000 tons of strawberries passed through Swanwick. The war interrupted the industry but it regained its production afterwards only to be followed by a slump. Production jumped again after the Second World War.

George as a youngster could walk from Titchfield to Warsash seeing strawberry fields all the way. His family aimed to have their first strawberries available by his birthday in mid May and they sold them as far away as Glasgow. He said the strawberry growers complained when there was a bad growing year but they still managed to have a new car.

Today, greater mechanisation with refrigeration has changed the way strawberries are handled ready for the shops and supermarkets or you have 'Pick your own'. Varieties of strawberries have been developed to last longer and many now come from Spain, taking four days. Most of the local strawberry fields have over the recent years been sold for housing developments.

At the end of the meeting some former strawberry growers in the audience shared their memories, which gave a very interesting insight to this once important local industry.