



THE UNIVERSITY OF THE THIRD AGE

Romsey and District U3A

Registered Charity N° 1082501

THE HISTORY OF MARKET GARDENING – GEORGE WATTS 16 January 2008

At their January meeting the Romsey and District U3A were entertained and informed by George Watts' talk on the History of Market Gardening. Nowadays we all take for granted the existence of green grocers and the fruit and vegetable sections of super markets to supply our needs but this was no always so. George chose the development of the availability of strawberries to illustrate the growing and marketing of fresh fruit and vegetables from very early times to the present day. He began by showing a copy of a painting from the sixteenth century showing fruit and vegetables being brought to market and telling us that the first documentary evidence of markets of herbs and fruit in England also date from the sixteenth century. Another picture called "Cries of London" that he showed had a woman with strawberries for sale. The baskets used to carry this produce were called gallons, quarts and pints depending on their size. Producers of the fruit and vegetables would walk to London from Middlesex up to four times a day to sell their wares. Obviously shoppers at that time preferred their fruit and vegetables fresh.

In 1816 Jane Austin wrote in her book "Emma" a description of the walled garden of a country house and the fruit and vegetables grown there, and noted that they were gathered each morning. She also told of the many different varieties of strawberries grown at that time and their varying flavours. From her writing we learn that well-off Londoners could afford to buy strawberries which they enjoyed very much.

Nearer to home in Fareham we were told of the families of navel officers living in elegant town houses with fruit gardens sloping down to the river. We also heard that poor labourers in the early nineteenth century did not eat fruit and vegetables if they had no gardens of their own because they could not afford to buy such produce.

The Enclosure Acts caused considerable tracts of Common land to be turned into small portions for agriculture. Much of the soil was gravelly and in its virgin state in was good for soft fruit growing. Those who farmed these strips of land were able to make extremely good livings. In Nelson's day Portsmouth contained areas of open fields which were turned into market gardens. These areas later became streets of terraced houses to house the growing population. The streets followed the strip system which had been used for agriculture.

The popularity of green grocers increased greatly. Southampton, being more middle class than Portsmouth, outstripped its neighbour in the numbers of such businesses. Fresh fruit and vegetables were served in most well-to-do homes. Recipes for their preparation and cooking appeared in Mrs Beeton's cookery book of 1859.

Southampton and Portsmouth grew quickly, both had good railway links with London and local producers brought their produce by horse and cart twice a day to the station to be taken to Victoria and from there to Covent Garden market. The railways also laid on trains with special wagons from

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local stations direct to London to transport strawberries from Hampshire. The strawberries were known as 'Southamptons' in London. The growing season was from June to August and men were employed at this time to cope with the loading of the fruit. Growers would receive telegrams from the London sellers informing them how much they had paid for the fruit and giving them requirements for the next day.

Nowadays most of the large strawberry fields have gone. The fruit is now grown in greenhouses or under plastic. Most of the land on which the fruit was grown has been built on.

Pat Morgan