

Why Was Swanwick Station the busiest station in England for a few weeks each year in the 1930's, and why did this cease to be the case?

Introduction To The Strawberry Industry

The strawberry industry was the farming and distribution of the finest strawberries in Hampshire. In this project I will explain why Swanwick station was the busiest in England in the 1930's. I will also explain why the strawberry industry developed and declined, and how these events changed life around the area. This area I will be researching is Swanwick, Locks Heath, Warsash and Titchfield. I will do this by visiting each of these sites and taking photographs. I will also be looking for places that have some significance to the industry such as Swanwick station, or old pubs etc. I am hoping to find out more about the strawberry industry in the 1930's, and I will hope to find out why the industry built up so fast, but declined just as fast.

The Site Today

Today, the site has clues as to how important the industry was. For example, MOJ Engineering is a building which used to be a basket factory, at the top of Duncan Road in Swanwick. At the bottom of Duncan Road is Swanwick Station, a two platform train station operating into Southampton, Portsmouth and London. The Q8 petrol station and the pub/restaurant The Talisman is in Park Gate, off the A27. Opposite Brookfield School in Sarisbury is a road called Strawberry Hill. This is a dead end road, but has brand new traffic lights for the main road at the bottom of the hill. The Joseph Paxton pub and the off-licence "Threshers" in Park Gate are both relevant to this study.

Photos from the Site Today



This is a photo of MOJ Engineering. The faded writing on the wall reads "Swanwick and District Basket Factory."



This is the outside of Swanwick Station today.



The Talisman at Park Gate

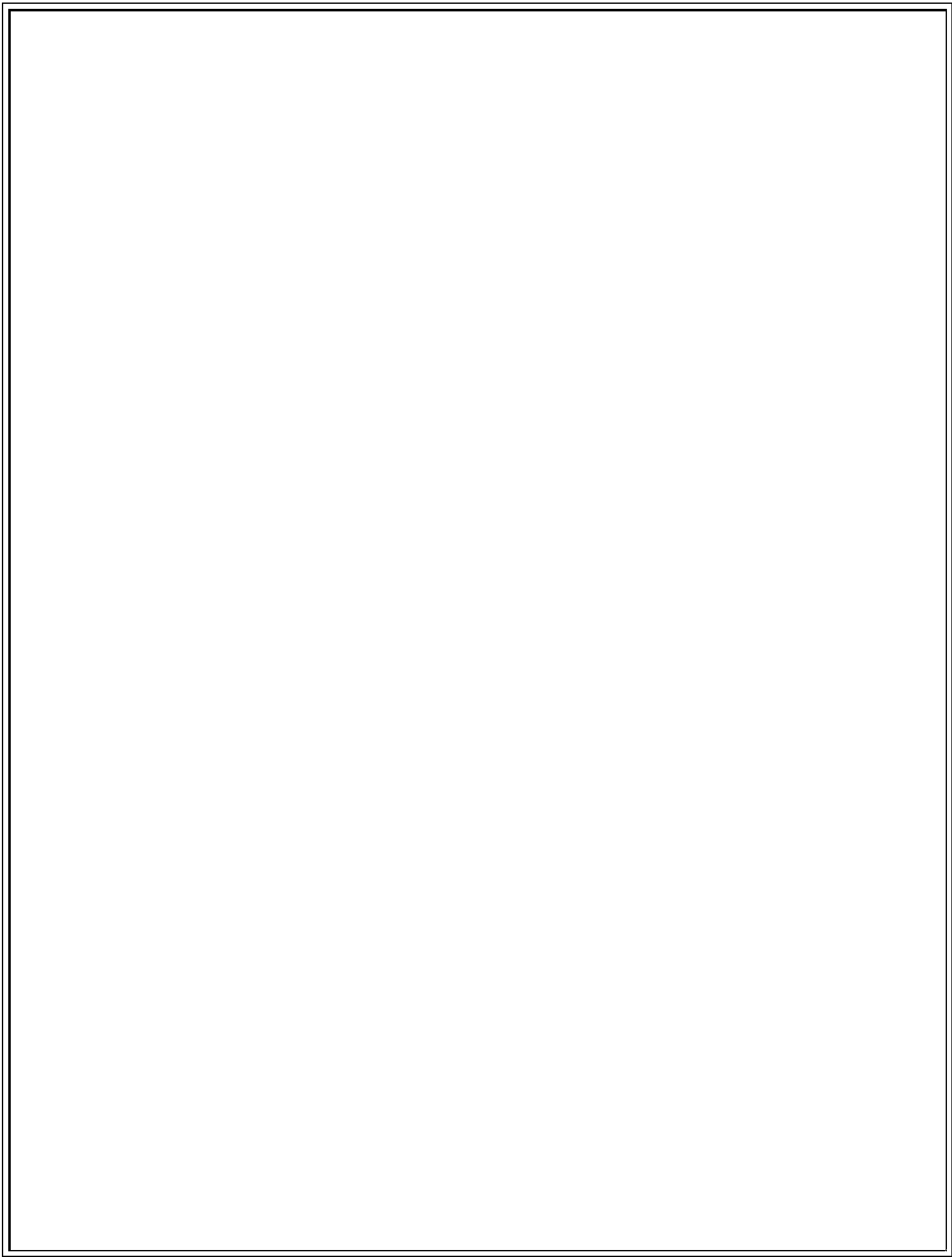


The Village Inn; used to be the inn for railway commuters.

The Site As It Was and How The Industry Developed

The site was completely different to what it is today, as it has endured many changes. In 1872, the strawberry industry picked up, and soon there were many growers across Swanwick, Warsash and Park Gate. They were mainly situated in the well known strawberry fields. As the industry developed, Swanwick train station was built. It was completed in 1888 and had the job of transporting the strawberries to London and various other places. Wicker baskets to hold the strawberries were transported in from Winchester Jail made by prisoners. However in 1913 the Swanwick and District Basket Factory was established adjacent to the station. It produced light and attractive plastic punnets. A successful season was critical for the industry and at encouraging moments during the growing period, prayers were offered for fair weather and a healthy crop as this was the growers' only source for income. During the season – usually mid June to mid July –the picking started as early as 4am for the 10am trains to places such as Aberdeen, Glasgow and Dublin. Because picking was hard, thirsty work, the local off-licence would supply a firkin of beer (about 9 gallons) everyday to each field throughout the season. The workers would receive a glass after 1000 baskets of strawberries had been picked. The fruit from the area was known in the trade as “Southamptons” and was soon recognised as been of a superior quality to that of competitors in Cornwall. The first variety of berry grown in the area was known as the “Maud” and was about the size of a thimble. Later came the “Joey” or “Paxtons”, short for Sir Joseph Paxton who was the producer of this strain, being much larger then the “Maud” and was considered by many experts to be the most delicious berry ever grown. Later servicemen from the Great War returned to look for jobs, and found strawberry growing to be the most suitable, as it would earn them sufficient amounts to support a family for the whole of the year. During the season, Swanwick was over-flowing with the horses and carts which transported the strawberries from the fields to the station. Strawberry Hill was a road in which they travelled by, as you can tell by the name. “It was recorded by some means that in the 1928 season 1,287,925 baskets left Swanwick station for London to take advantage of the lucrative markets there.” Much of the crop was grown for London markets, whose salesmen spoke highly of the local fruit. “Up to sixty pair-horse wagons were needed to convey the fruit from Waterloo to the markets.) The land around the area was perfect for growing strawberries, but only strawberries as it didn't have the right nutrients for other crops, which is a reason why the industry developed, as they had no competition. The availability of pickers was immense, as gypsies would invade the area as pickers for the picking rate of a penny farthing per 4 pound chip basket or 6 pence per hour. Whole families would work up to 18 hours per day. This was good for the industry as it meant more work could be done faster meaning more income.

Photos from The Site As It Was



Why did the Industry Decline?

The sudden boom of strawberry growing was a success but it was in 1913 that a new variety of berry was to prove disastrous to the growers. The “Madame La Fevebre” was favoured and was for several years known as a good cropper. However it was this variety that brought the deadly disease “root – rot” to the area. As a consequence, crops were badly hit and this coupled with the depression led to many growers going bankrupt. started to deteriorate in the 1930’s. One of the main reasons was that the earth was basically exhausted. Growers had used the land to the extent that it would no longer yield the crops. The Depression, late frosts in 1938 and finally the outbreak of war hastened the decline of the industry in the 30’s. The survivors from the war realised that there were better jobs on offer, and didn’t return to growing strawberries. There was a lot of competition from foreigners as well, as their crops ripened earlier and were sold cheaper. This was a problem for local growers as with this competition, they weren’t getting the money they needed to support their families. Around this time (30’s/early 40’s) air transport was developing, so England was experiencing foreign strawberries. The growth of supermarkets instead of small fruit markets meant they needed “perfect” strawberries, and with all the problems in the area, the standards declined. Along with the developing supermarkets, the land originally used for crops was being increased to build houses on. By the 1940’s the trend was general produce such as potatoes and tomatoes (for the rationing during the war.) However this growth of produce continued after the war and competed against strawberry growers. 1949 was particularly bad for them as Nurseries were developing all round the district with vast areas under glass. “Locks Heath Nurseries” boasted the largest greenhouse in Hampshire given over to the cultivation of tomatoes.

To Conclude...

Looking back to the 40 boom years or so from the 1870’s Locks Heath has been established all because of their strawberries. Nowadays they are associated with the recent phenomenon of “pick your own.” There are few memories left from this time, such as the station, and the basket factory etc, but the seasonal frenzied activity which included every citizen of Locks Heath, young and old, every year are now long since over.