

Downton Abbey's local market is flourishing in its traditional Market Place



Down the road from Highclere Castle, filming location for ITV's *Downton Abbey*, Newbury's ancient market shares the tradition and history epitomised in the TV blockbuster. **Nicola Gould** visits a market rooted in the past but planning for the future



With a solid backbone of long-established market businesses, Newbury Market is on a sound footing. The Saturday market is thriving with around 25 traders who set up stall in the picture-perfect Market Place against a backdrop of half-timbered listed buildings, a medieval cloth hall, an impressive town hall and the 15th century St Nicholas Church.

The Thursday charter market is a smaller affair, but it retains a bedrock of high quality, professional traders. And Newbury Town Council, which runs the market in partnership with the traders, is looking at new ways to give the weekday market that extra boost.

Dating back centuries, the market has been a much-loved part of Newbury's history and heritage down the years and has prospered under the stewardship of the town council.

Caroline Edmunds, the community services officer for the council with responsibility for running the market, said it was a cherished asset of a town that

became prosperous from the cloth trade.

These days it boasts a flourishing economy and is home to an impressive cohort of businesses including Vodafone's headquarters. With Highclere Castle, the fictional *Downton Abbey*, as well as the beautiful Berkshire Downs on its doorstep, it is also a tourist town with plenty to

attract visitors.

The council has put a lot of effort into supporting the market in recent years, keeping rents affordable and employing traders to manage the market.

"We have re-established a market working group which includes councillors, members of Newbury BID (Business Improvement District) and traders," said Caroline.

"We think it best to have traders managing the market, because they know what works best," she said.

And initiatives to boost the market include an incentive for new traders who are offered four weeks free trading once they have completed their first four weeks on the market. The council believes this gives new recruits the incentive to give market trading a proper try to see whether they can build a viable market business.

Caroline is also contacting local colleges to try to bring young traders on to the market, with a free day's trading with a gazebo included to try to encourage new blood to the market scene.



Caroline Edmunds is community services officer for Newbury Town Council with responsibility for running the market

Debbie Smith, who manages the market with her husband Mac, said the town council did a good job supporting the market. "It's been run by the town council for as long as I can remember and that is good because they look after it and are proud of it," she said.

Debbie started on the market as a Saturday girl helping on a toy and haberdashery stall when she was 14. She married market trader Mac Smith, whose family have run a meat business on the market since the 1960s.

She and Mac have been managing it since the previous trader/manager retired seven years ago.

Debbie began helping Mac on the meat stall when he took over from his parents 23 years ago. "Then I decided if I was on the market all day I might as well run a stall of my own."

She started a business selling locally

made baked goods during Covid, and it has done well.

Debbie said the market had a good Covid, probably because it has a strong contingent of high quality, traditional food businesses and the council succeeded in keeping it open throughout the pandemic.

"We were lucky that the market square is so big which gave us plenty of room to comply with the restrictions," Debbie said.

As well as Debbie's bakery goods and Mac's meat stall, there is another butchers, a South African cured meat business, a fruit and veg stall, fresh fish from Grimsby, a coffee bean stall, an egg stall and a very successful doughnut business that launched during the pandemic, among others.

Debbie and Mac remember the boom times. There were seven fruit and veg stalls when she started on the market, and Mac can remember the busy times when he helped out on his parents' stall as a

young boy.

"It was a really booming market when my parents started here, but there are still good, solid traders who have good products and do well here," Mac said.

Other traditional food traders also prosper. Emily Broun-Turner has plenty of regular customers for the egg business she took over from her dad, Mike Broun, who retired during the pandemic.

"My dad always lived on a farm in Tidmarsh and kept his own chickens," Emily said. At one point he had 40,000 chickens and did wholesaling, doorstep deliveries and sold on markets throughout Oxfordshire.

She had always helped with the business when she could, but in 2009 she gave up her job in sales to sell on markets full-time.

"I have no regrets at all. I love being outdoors and the contact and friendship



Debbie Smith, who has a bakery stall on the market, started as a Saturday girl at 14. She now manages the market for the council with her husband, Mac, whose family have been selling meat there since the 1960s



Mac Smith helped on his parents' meat stall from a young age and has been running the business himself for the past 23 years



Emily Broun-Turner gave up her job in sales to sell eggs on markets and now runs the business her father Mike Broun headed until he retired during the pandemic



Sharon Moore sells biltong and other South African products for Unduna Meats, a business run by her partner, Gavin Murphy, who hails from Zimbabwe



Neil Germain runs Crazydayz, a doughnut business which has taken off on Newbury market after he launched it there two-and-a-half years ago

with customers and traders,” Emily said.

These days she buys her eggs from a local farm. “Newbury is a good market for us and we have plenty of regulars after all these years, but the Thursday market doesn’t have the footfall and new businesses haven’t the loyal shoppers we rely on,” she added.

But enterprising new businesses are cutting it on the market. Sharon Moore helps with her partner’s business Induna Meats selling South African biltong and other cured meats from a van he converted.

Her partner, Gavin Murphy, hails from Zimbabwe and is a carpenter by trade. He is also a former world class sportsman and suffered the usual catalogue of injuries which started affecting his carpentry work.

“He started making biltong which he missed from southern Africa and decided it could become a good business,” Sharon said.

Six years ago he bought a gazebo and the

business has gone well. “He converted our garage and during Covid he converted his van to sell hot food, then continued with the cured meats business,” Sharon said.

And Neil Germain has also successfully launched a food business on Newbury market.

“I started Crazydayz selling specialist doughnuts on the market on the day I was made redundant from the big bakery company I used to work for,” he said.

Neil was steeped in every aspect of the bakery business, from baking to marketing, and he decided to focus on delicious doughnuts because he could never find a decent basic jam doughnut to buy for himself.

Now he bakes an amazing range of tasty doughnuts and the business has taken off in the two-and-a-half years it has been going.

“I have found the market is a great place to start and run a business,” said Neil, who benefits from casual sales, loyal custom



and bulk orders.

“People try my doughnuts and often come back and make a bulk order for a special event. In August I supplied five weddings,” he said.

Neil, Sharon and Gavin are proof that niche businesses can succeed on Newbury market, but no one is quite sure how best to boost the number of traders, and hence the footfall, on the Thursday market.

Traders who moved on to the High Street in 2006 when the market square was refurbished, said they did better there, and Northbrook Street just off the market place is the main shopping street.

But the market square is its traditional home, and that is doubtless where traditionalists, including the Crawley family of Downton Abbey fame, would like to see it remain and flourish.

Anyone interested should ring Caroline Edmunds on 07399 122964 or email caroline.edmunds@newbury.gov.uk.



FACTS & FIGURES

- **Market days:** Thursday and Saturday
- **Market rent:** £16.50 per day for traders who pay a month in advance. £25.50 for casuals. There’s a four-week free offer for new traders who pay and stand their first four weeks on the market. Another incentive for young traders aged 16 to 30 is a free trial on the market including a gazebo
- **Newbury’s claim to fame:** This Berkshire town is famous for its racecourse and is also the UK headquarters of Vodafone and several other large companies. Close to the Berkshire Downs, an area of outstanding natural beauty, it built its prosperity on the cloth trade. The 16th century cloth magnate Jack of Newbury built the first factory in the country and the legend of the Newbury coat of arms centred on a bet that a gentleman’s suit could be produced by the end of the same day from wool that was taken from a sheep in the morning.