

Truffles *in* Winterslow

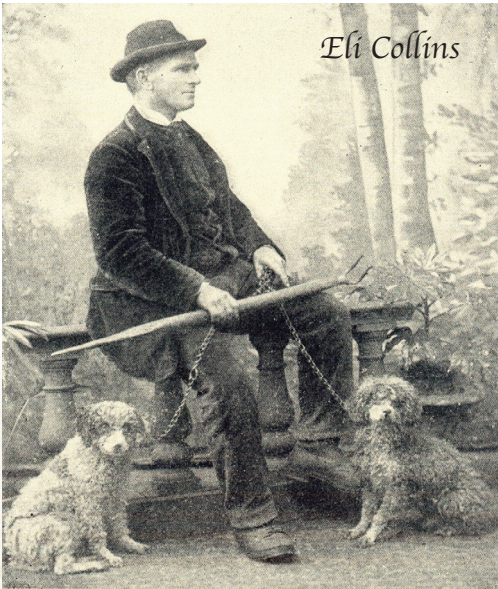
What's in a Name? Truffles Coffee Shop Winterslow Village Hall

In 1992 a coffee shop was established in the Village Hall, opening from 10 to 12 each week day.
Why was Truffles the choice of name in the competition to name the venue?

The answer is straight forward. Winterslow is steeped in the history of truffle hunting.

Truffles have held a certain mystique for many years in history as well as today, but just what is that that makes them so special? Truffles have always been in demand and as their supply has been limited they fetched a high price, becoming renowned as a luxury item. Charles Dickens once wrote "Truffles, like caviar, are things of which many talk who never saw or tasted them."

History shows that truffles were common in England and notably in the South in counties like Wiltshire where collecting truffles became a cottage industry as early as the 17th century and continued until the early part of the 20th. Our parish became famous for its truffle hunters, who applied their skill across Dorset, Summerset, Hampshire and beyond; including the Isle of Wight.



Eli Collins

Our parish became synonymous with truffle hunting as the Collins family, specifically through the exploits of Eli Collins, who was said to have connections with all the titled families in the southern counties right up to the ripe old age of 83. In today's parlance the Collins family appeared to "have cornered the market" send his finds all over the country.

One of Eli's closest supporters was Lord Radnor of Longford Castle, Salisbury who it is believed gave him his famous velvet coat. In 1861 truffle hunting came under threat as it was deemed trespassing and also a "licence for locals to undertake vagrant activities and carry out poaching". Eli's close contact with the gentry paid off when in response lord Radnor gave him a testimonial stating "Eli Collins has been allowed to hunt for truffles on my Estate for nearly 45 years, commencing to do so with his father - he has never during that time encroached in any way; and has conducted himself respectably

Hunters started by using pigs, but this arrangement soon ended when dogs were introduced and found to be just as effective, easier to train and useful for other activities. The favoured dog was a poodle type which had a thick protective curly coat. Alfred Collins best dog was Major, a cross poodle - terrier. Alfred recounted that a Spaniard used to come over during the truffle season, leaving the dog with locals when he returned. Because of their popularity amongst the gentry Prince Albert gave Queen Victoria two white truffle dogs in 1842.

In 1860 the Government of the day introduced a "dog tax levy" which included truffle dogs which resulted in a petition being sent to the House of Lords.

"We, the undersigned Poor Men of the parish of Winterslow, in the county of Wilts, do humbly solicit the attention of our Honourable House to our humble Petition. Being poor labouring men, mostly with families and aged, and living in a woody district of the county, where there is a great many English truffles grow, which we cannot find without dogs, we do therefore keep and use a small puddle sort of dog wholly and solely for that and no other purpose; and, as it is in the winter season of the year when we gather them, when labourers is generally on the excess in our neighbourhood, we often are enabled by the aforesaid dogs to provide a subsistence for our families, otherwise we should often be a burden to the parish; and as it hath been carried on by our ancestors for generations past without paying any tax for the dogs; but as the tax is now levelled upon us, viz. twelve shillings per year, and as we have to keep our dogs six months when we have no use for them, it presses so heavy upon us that without redress we shall in most cases, be obliged to make a sacrifice of our dogs, and thereby become a burden on the parish..."

This heralded the death knell for truffle hunting, which gradually declined into an occupation which did not pay. With the retirement of the last professional truffle hunter Alfred Collins in the 1930s the truffle hound became a fast disappearing breed.