

Football and Food Poverty

Hirst Park is situated in the heart of Ashington, a mining town in the beautiful county of Northumberland. The town was, until the late 1980's, the location of the largest coal mine in the UK. With a history that spans over 100 years, Hirst Park has been enjoyed by generations of families and even used as a place of refuge for those evicted from their homes in 1926 by the Coal Mining Company following their decision to strike against work conditions and a reduction in pay, setting up a small community, living in poverty under canvas in the park until their prospects improved.

Around a decade or so later some local lads, you may have heard of them; Jackie Milburn and his Mothers' cousins, Bobby and Jack Charlton, enjoyed kicking a ball around in Hirst Park. Jack was spotted playing football in the park by a scout from Leeds United. Speaking in an interview Jack said "The football pitches where we played were created from ash tip from the colliery and these were our first training grounds - our very own Wembley. The park was a precious place where me and Bobby learned our craft, training and playing for fun, before going on to join Leeds and Manchester United then playing in the World-Cup winning England side in 1966. Hirst Park made it possible for us and would play all day if we could - and we often did!"

Today, the park is well used by the community and has recently become home to us at Full Circle Food - an Ashington based charity started in 2014 that has grown and developed, supporting the local community through educating them about growing food to eat, healthy cooking on a budget and supporting people to lead healthier lifestyles. We are a small team of 5 staff with a handful of the most loyal and passionate volunteers all dedicated to supporting our community to improve mental health and reduce food poverty. As the name suggests our service delivery goes full circle...

We are resident in the park in a new building funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the National Lottery Communities Fund as part of the Hirst Park Revival Project. The building includes a fully fitted training kitchen which allows us to deliver cooking classes for adults, children and families, helping them to learn how to cook healthy meals from scratch, on a budget while reducing the need to rely on the community larder which is another service we offer to those who need it. We are really passionate about food waste and child poverty - which sadly is a high statistic in our area. All throughout the year we host events such as our weekly pop up soup takeaway, winter warmer meals and recipe boxes for people to cook at home with their family to name a few.

In 2020 we joined FareShare in the fight to reduce food waste and hunger and use the food distributed through the scheme to cook free meals for our community. To date we have helped redistribute over 3 tonnes of food. We are avid supporters of footballer Marcus Rashford's campaign to ensure every child has food, giving out free packed lunches and hot meals throughout the school holidays, something I'm sure Sir Bobby Charlton, a Manchester United veteran would be proud to be behind in his hometown of Ashington. This is something we continue to deliver and are extremely passionate about.

