

Hop Picking

I was the youngest girl in a family of twelve, and my father was a farm labourer. I first remember hop picking when I was about 4- 5 years old, it was on a farm in Mereworth, Kent, I think it was Hermitage Farm.

We used to arrive in the hop-garden before 7am, when even if it hadn't been raining (it never did in those days!), the hops were wet with heavy dew and jolly cold too. Being the baby, I didn't have to pick if I didn't want to but the rest of the family had to. They picked in boxes, baskets, old buckets and sometimes old brollies. When each of them had filled their container these were emptied into the big hessian or sacking affair called a bin.

Hop picking started usually at the beginning of September and as I grew older I loved it, even now if I go near a hop field I want to start scratching them off the bines. The hops grew on branches from the bines which were trained to grow on strings in groups of four and when it was a good growing year they looked beautiful. My father was mainly a hop drier but I can remember him being a binman, and also measuring the bushels at one time.

The binman would go around with a long hooked pole and lift down the heads of the bines that we left up when we pulled the hops ready for picking. When the bins were getting full the measurers would call "hops ready" and we had to pick out all the leaves, especially the big ones, this was called cleaning the hops and we were thought to be ready the measurers would come round with a bushel basket and, take the hops from the bins and put them in a sack or "hop poke". As he took our hops out each time, he counted as he filled the basket and we used to wait with baited-breath to find out how many bushels we had picked. I don't really remember what the pay was but I think I can remember that at some time we had to pick eight bushels before earning a shilling. As my mother went hop picking to get money for our school clothes you can understand why messing about around the bin was not encouraged. By the way, if the hops were not cleaned properly the measurer would leave them until next time. My mother's hops were usually all right unless my father had been picking and I think as many leaves as hops went in when he had helped.

All sorts of traders came into the hop garden, okie cokie [[Hokey Pokey](#)] ice cream of course, the doughnut man and the man selling fruit. At that time I was mad on bananas and being rather spoilt I was allowed to pick the biggest in the basket. Of course, we used to take our lunch out with us and I can remember my mother used to make some special meat and vegetable pies, these were plate pies filled with corned beef, onion, carrot and potatoes. They were delicious. A slice of that and an enamel mug of tea boiled and brewed in the old black kettle hung from the kettle hook over a faggot fire was to us kids sheer bliss. After my dinner I was often allowed to snooze on the rolled, used bines under an umbrella, it was lovely dozing off with the buzz of voices and the lovely hoppy smell.

In 1937, when I was 12, our parents and family moved to Bodiam in Sussex. Here we were living in the midst of hop fields. My father was employed by Arthur Guinness of the Dublin brewers and here we found hop picking in a big way. Just along the road from our house in a clearing of a big wood and under the trees there were row upon row of tin and wooden huts. These were home to a lot of London people who made a summer holiday out of earning money from the hop picking season. In the evenings there were electric light bulbs threaded through the trees and on poles, and the people would cook their supper in pots over big campfires, weather permitting, otherwise the big tin cookhouses were used. Just across the road from the camp was a shop, a brick and tin affair opened especially for hopping, sometimes by the International Stores or the Co-Op. Also, there was a nurse's hut, which every evening seemed to be overflowing with patients.

Every weekend the travelling evangelists were at the camp. Us children sat around the fires at night chatting to the lovely London people and joined in the choruses like "Tell me the story" etc. and "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam". They were lovely days and at the end when all the hops were picked and the bines rolled ready for cutting before the winter we said goodbye to our London friends promising we would look for them the following year.

Another memory I have is walking to the local pub which was at the crossroads and finding all the roads blocked completely with people sitting, drinking and singing and then hearing them winding their way home singing all the popular songs. During the war, when the planes started the dogfights overhead a lot of the Londoners went back home so the pickers that were left had to work on Sundays to get the hops picked before they spoiled. Later on, I took my three children hopping in Bodiam with my sisters. We did not earn a lot as we did not take it quite so seriously because we were a bit better off financially than when I was a child, but the fun was still there. Most of the pickers by this time came out from Bexhill, Battle and Hastings every day by buses and lorries.

The hops are all gone now from Bodiam. Before they finished I tried working on the picking machine in about 1966 but it was not the same, it was too dirty and noisy and my "hoppy" atmosphere was gone forever.

Betty Lawrence 1986