

Pat Doyle – Memories of Hop Picking – Bodiam 1955

My father had recently died. My Mother was distraught and being an only child I gave up my job to stay with her and her sister in St. Leonard s. Soon needed money, owed bills, so my uncle who taught the farmer's daughter piano, got me a job as a measurer.

There were two of us and after 3 days the other fellow quit. It was hard work, 50 bins measured 3 times day. Was so sore at first but I got stronger. Early start in the mornings, then yelled out "stop picking" . They stood by their bins watching me, I got a bonus if the weight was right for the farmer. Just meant pushing the hops down harder. I wanted to be fair to the pickers though so I had to balance it. When there were too many leaves I'd walk past their bin, that meant they could not pick more until I emptied it later. That brought cooperation fast enough!

After finishing the first measure I'd rest under a shady tree, enjoy a soft drink and gifts of food given to me by the pickers. There were some offers included too After the 3rd and last measure of the day, I'd drive home tired, have a bath and rest.

My crowd was mainly Londoners; there was not much liking for the local Sussex pickers. They thought they were a sly bunch of people.

One day they heard that another place was paying more per bushel. It was 11d at that time, talking to the farmer got no results. So a strike was called. They all downed tools and sat by their bins. One old lady about 80 kept on picking, a bunch of people grabbed her stuffed her panties with hops, threw her in her bin and turned it upside down on her. With my fellow measurer and our help we lifted it off her, she was fine, her language was enough to make me blush.

Finally the mood of the crowd was seemingly turning ugly. Then the farmer arrived. He was wearing shorts, sitting on a horse with iodine covering his knees and parts of his legs. I was told he'd been kicked by a horse. He rode into that crowd, like an avenging angel or a medieval knight without his armour. We feared for his safety, he had disappeared. Then we could hear arguing and shouting, suddenly a huge roar went up, the crowd parted and the farmer rode out they had got a rise to a shilling a bushel.

Back to work as usual, all went well from then on.

Eventually the last day arrived, I had been warned what to expect! While I was measuring I found my legs grabbed and I was upended into the bin. A tradition for the final day. I managed to extricate myself. It happened again shortly after. This time I was not alone in the bin there was a girl in there with me trying to grab part of my anatomy, she succeeded which would have been fine with me except I had an audience. Eventually the last measure was completed with only two more incidents.

On the Saturday I was invited to join my pickers for a beer or two in a

local pub. I used to play a lot of cricket and could put a lot of beer away. So I left my car at home and got a lift to the pub.

One had to pay a deposit on a glass in case you broke it throwing it at someone. One man in my photo was the uncle of that girl in the bin with me. He said “ my niece fancies you; she’s getting married in three weeks, so if you put her in the family way it won’t matter”. Bear in mind there were no pills back then. She came over to me later and said “where’s your car parked?” I said I had left it at home, which of us was the most upset, hard to tell, I certainly was! Still think about that.

At one time that money meant a lot to the pickers, then when I was there it was a holiday for the kids. Some extra spending money for the adults too, Christmas presents for the kids.

Towards the end of that boozy evening, the same uncle showed up with a big floppy hat, it had been passed around the crowd there and was full of money. He said “ you have been fair with us we’d like you to have this” I accepted it and that and what I had earned over the past weeks paid most of my bills.

I look back with fond memories of that unfortunately only one experience of measuring. It was fun for me. This is abbreviated but every word is true as I remember it. There may still be someone out there who may remember this.

The picture below is of Pat sitting on a bin.



The picture below is of his "crew"



Keith's Notes

In Pat's original e-mail to me he gave me the following introduction -

“Just came across some old pics someone took of me, when I was a measurer there in '55. That period of just over 3 weeks was a time of hard work and fun! I had one hell of a good time with the Londoners, have a photos of my crew, the Tallyman being a lady called Terry if my memory serves me right. I wonder if anyone could identify her? I know the locals pronounced Bodiam to rhyme with “Dodgem” I was 21 and have never forgotten those weeks. And the stories that went with them! In charge of me was a police superintendent from Eastbourne, never saw him much, he spent his time testing Guinness during the day.”

Can anyone identify “Terry” in the photo above, or anyone else in his crew?

From the memories above, I would think the man on the horse would have been Frank Jarvis. Does anyone else have any views?