

Albert Soden

Memories of a childhood at Udiam Farm

For the first 10 to 12 years of his life Albert spent most summer holidays at Udiam hop picking with his mum and dad.

The following are some of Albert's recollections of the time spent at Udiam.

I was born in last part of the second world war war in North Kensington (West London). There was little money around, so holidays meant a trip to the Guinness hop pickers camp at Udiam so mum could earn a bit extra! That's a joke, we always came home with less than we started with.

The camp was called The Ridge at Frank Jarvis's [*Frank was foreman of Udiam Farm*] farm in a field just a little way past his house and the oast house.

As kids we fished and swam in the Rother. At this time the train we called the bumper, used to stop at the Junction Halt [*Udiam Halt*] on its way to and from Robertsbridge. One of our little games was to hide alongside the track and wait till it started to move and hang onto the guards van buffers until it got up a little speed then we would see who was the bravest and hung the longest.

Once me and two boys from the same row of huts walked the track to Robertsbridge on a bright Sunday afternoon. Not knowing how far it was, it took a lot longer than we realised and when we got there it was getting a little dark, so we headed back forgetting that parts of the track crossed over the Rother. Looking down between the rails was the water, by the time we got to the first bridge it was dark and it was frightening. We made it back OK to find the police had a search party out and there was uproar at the camp with people with torches and dogs combing the hop gardens and dragging the Rother for us.

In the camp we cooked on an open air fire and there was a big old pot on the side in the ashes all the time that use to have every thing put into it. It made the best stew you ever tasted. We all looked forward to that after a day in the hop garden. The main thing being rabbit that we got from "Gypsy George" who came round the huts every day with stuff for sale - mushrooms, apples, all sorts of veg, chickens, anything that he dug up or poached the day before.

George was a smashing man and taught me a lot about the outdoor life. Sometimes he took me with him on his rabbit poaching with his ferrets. He showed me how to set nets over a area of holes and how to break the rabbits neck when it got trapped in the net after being chased out of the warren by the ferret. Sometimes the ferret traps the rabbit in the hole and kills it. Then you try to dig out the hole to recover the ferret.

I was always given a share of the spoil to take home and share among the others on our site, I would watch mum skin and gut the rabbit by hanging it on a nail by its back legs that had been tied together. The skin being given to the dogs to play with. The paws where given to the boys to chase the girls with, the rest went into the pot for a lovely rabbit stew.

The Guinness Farm at Udiam was governed by a Frank Jarvis. A big man with a red face and he suffered with gout. I can see him now visiting the hop garden where we were picking, on his big white horse shouting out that we were not picking fast enough, and waving his whip in the air. When he was riding off, I would hide behind the hop vines and throw stones at his horse hoping it would jump and dump him on the ground, [it never did]. He lived in the only house on the Farm

and it is still there. It has become a listed building and can be seen on a website for Udiam House. The River Rother ran along the bottom of his garden and when we used to swim there, we would sneak into his garden and pinch his apples and be chased by his chickens or dog.

I don't suppose you know, but the hoppers shop was called the shant [I don't know why]. The shant was down in Cranham Woods about half a mile away [well it felt like that to a small boy] and I was sent down to get bread and milk if we ran out. The shant was on another site through the woods, and walking back with the light going was a bit scary. I remember one time on the way back to the hut on my own with the bread, I nibbled a piece of the end of the loaf, [big mistake] by the time I got home I had eaten the middle out of the loaf. I got a good hiding and sent back for another one in the dark.

The Cranham Camp was where the weekly picture show took place from the back of a truck, and the ladies would give out baked potatoes from the ashes to the kids. The same truck would bring the priest on Sunday morning and say mass. I have got to say the pictures always got better attendance.

Talking about entertainment the Saturday night visit to the Bodiam Castle pub or the Golden Cross (was it called that?) at Staplecross if some one had transport. If it was the Castle, Mum and Dad walked, part of way was along the railway line to Bodiam Halt then on the road to Bodiam village. Walking back in the dark after drinking all that Guinness was no fun. One time Dad fell over on the cinder track that led to the railway line and scraped off the end of his nose .

The pub made the hoppers welcome and gave them a long shed next to the pub just for hoppers. The locals didn't like to mix with us Londoners. We always went with them (Mum and Dad) on Saturday nights because no one was left to keep us out of mischief. I liked the Castle pub best as it sat at the back of the village green right opposite the old post office and the entrance to the castle itself. We had to stay outside the pub we had great fun playing in and around the castle like trying to hook out the carp from the moat. When we went to Staplecross, the pub was on junction of two roads and sitting there was not very nice. Talking about Staplecross I can remember when there was windmill right across the road from the pub.

I am sure the picture of the man getting the long service award from the Queen Mother is the man who did the measuring on our hop garden at Udiam [Bill Brabon]. I can see him now in his old flat cap.



I don't know how rare the sight of the castle is with out any water around it and I wonder what happened to the lovely carp that was in it. Because we come from London we didn't have much understanding of country ways and must have made a bit of a problem to the locals like fishing in somebodies lake or pinching eggs from the farms along the road from Bodiam to Staplecross.

I recall on one trip up that road we come across a length of tube in the middle about two foot long, so my mate picked it up, only to find it was a snake. He dropped it very quickly and we ran as fast as we could back to Bodiam station.

Thinking about snakes there was another time when I was hunting for lizards on the old stack of railway sleepers at the sidings of Udiam Station [we called it the Junction Halt] when I turned over a rotten sleeper and a snake darted out at my feet. I was on my own and it give me bad fright. I never told mum in case she stopped me going of on my own in the afternoon when I had done my mornings pickings on the hop field.

We would get to the field early, when the dew was still on the bines and when you pulled one down you would get a soaking. My first job was to light a fire and get the pot on for the tea or cocoa , then I would be sent off up the drift with a empty hop sack to pick into until lunch break or till mum said you have done enough and the rest of the day was yours. Going back to the lizards ,when we had found some we put them in tin and took them back to the hut. We pulled off their tails and watched them, knowing that a new one would soon grow. Back at hut I had to make sure we had enough wood and water for that night. This meant a trip to the faggot stack, that's what the bundles of wood were called ,and being just kids, we struggled to carry one so we would make a kind of stretcher and then we could carry two. Also, we would need to go to the standpipe at the end of the row of huts. The big boys would put a strong stick across their shoulders and balance a bucket on each end, we could only manage a billy can and we had lost most of it by the time we got back.

That picture of your dad (Rex Ennis in the Udiam Oast gang). Was it taken outside the front of Udiam Oast House? If it was, the field behind was the field that our huts run along the top of [called the ridge] and just to the left of that picture was a very old house standing on its own with a young girl and her parents living in it. I can't remember her name now [could have been Felice] but we made their lives miserable and they were glad to see the back of us when the season ended .