

Memories of New House 2 Oast at Bodiam

In the 1950's, £15 a week was a lot of money, if you were a student. That's what seasonal oast workers could earn at Bodiam as a basic wage. There was also the Pocket Money, your share of the harvest of pressed hops. That, at 6d (2.5p) per pocket (sack), could almost double it.

One foggy morning in September with a heavy dew, Mark Saville and I would travel bleary-eyed in his old black Morris to New House 2 Oast. You earned your cash. From 8 a.m. Monday to 5 p.m. Saturday drying was a non-stop process. There were breaks of two or three hours, sometimes more. But they were unpredictable. You might make it to Hastings and see two thirds of a film in the Gaiety but then you had to leave to be ready to pull out the hops from the kiln exactly when Tim Baitup the drier said.

We graduated to the Oast after a couple of years on the machine, which Reg Murdoch was in charge of. A dirty pressure job, tying vines to hooks on the belt as they arrived by tractor. Bunny Lawrence was one of the drivers. I'd been at school with three of his children, Pam, Ethel, and Spiky (Mike) who was a good bowler. After the bines had been through the thresher we had to scratch out the leaves and stems. Later we were grease monkeys crawling underneath to pump oil into its many nipples. But at least you got home to sleep. Reg's brother Arthur worked there too. One night he invited us to his club at Staplecross to play snooker. He was showing off his new workmates to his acquaintances. But one of them poured most of a saltcellar into Arthur's Guinness which caused him to splutter and brought the evening to a rapid end.

In the Oast we ate, slept and rested in the mess, a concrete-floored cell with bunks and a board table, with newspapers spread to catch the spillage from quart milk bottles half full of jersey cream, or pints of Guinness from the barrel provided free every Monday. Mark had a special mug of Burmese teak with a metal lining. Brian Knox-Peebles invented a new breakfast item, cornflakes and Guinness. Food came from Fred Archer's canteen, huge trays of bacon rashers, sausages, fried eggs, baked beans and fried bread, swimming in fat. It was all very military with a colonel in charge.

If there was any stout left by Saturday evening, we'd grab an empty milk bottle or two and carry them off to any party we could gatecrash. We were not welcome. After a week we reeked of hop pollen. Only Fairy Liquid, recommended by my mother, made any impression. If we could remove the black sticky stuff from our skin, it remained in our hair. People at parties would sniff, frown, look under the sofa or ask where the dog was. Same stink. Sunday passed in a blur. Then it was Monday again.

We'd load the kiln with hops from the machine. If it had been raining, they'd be soaking wet. Then we took a break while they cooked, keeping an ear open for Tim's bang on the door, LET'S GO. If we didn't show at once this was followed by DON'T YOU WANT THIS JOB, THEN? The drier had an important job. He had to decide when the hops were ready. They always seemed to be cooked in the middle of the night. Four of us, one on each corner of a huge black sheet of sacking, had to heave the sticky, stinking little buggers out onto the pressing floor. There we teamed up with our press operator, Mark with Bill Goodsell, me with Edgar Smith, whose wife made brilliant jam sponges with cream filling. We'd shovel the hops into long pockets which hung from circular holes in the board floor. The Bill and Edgar would lower the metal feet of the presses, trying to tamp down the hops without going off true and ripping the side of the sack. But they did rip. Mark and I would get to work sewing them up while Bill and Edgar sloped off for a smoke and a chat.

The full pockets were stacked ready for collection by a flatbed truck and loaded with slings. One lecherous driver, a fag stuck to his drooling lip, said they put him in mind of ladies' thighs!

A rest, then begin again, and again and again, till you didn't know if it was midnight or Thursday.

The work force included the likes of Martin Harrison, Dick Jowett, and novelist and literary scholar David Caute before he was either of those! There was a colourful Asian lad we nick-named Indian Gymkhana. There were Irish lads called Liam or Sean, and the Ukrainians Simon and Peter, who had a fine bass voice.

Sometimes the Colonel would escort guests round. They would peer at us pleb-specimens and we would act up as we thought they expected, scratching and spitting and mopping our brows. We didn't much like being watched at work by clean fragrant people, nothing like us.

One night visiting the corrugated shed which was our toilet, I trod on anail sticking out of a rotten plank. It went straight through the sole of my plimsoll, drawing blood. Medical emergency. The military knew what to do. I was into sick bay, injected with anti-tetanus and back at work before you could say ARTHUR GUINNESS.

Some Saturdays we'd go to the Junction and on to dances at Staplecross or some other village hall. One year there were two Ilford lads, John Broughton and Clive (Wal) Wallace. They knew some of the east London pickers and we'd rockn'roll with bold girls like Gloria who was about fifteen and boasted of having got into Lonnie Donnegan's dressing room. It was a volatile mix of east enders and locals from Sussex and Kent competing for space and girls or boys. Years later I went back to see what New House 2 looked like. The machine had gone, the mess was neglected. It was difficult to believe that was where we worked so hard and met such interesting people.

Geoff Sutton

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