

# Penny Philcox

## Philcox and Son, of Catsfield working at Guinness Hop Farms

I have enjoyed looking at your site very much, thank you.

My interest is that my father Frank Philcox and brother Richard, as Philcox and Son, of Catsfield. They did a great deal of work at the Guinness Hop Farm, as I remember it, in the mid 1960's, to engineer the change from traditional hop-drying to the introduction of electric heating and drying systems.

We have no family photos of this time, sadly, but I remember going with them sometimes to see the works and the oasts etc. Their work, as I remember it, was putting in steelwork required to support the new mechanical drying equipment. I used to love visiting and also the smell of hops on their clothes when they got back from long, tiring days working at the site. When they finished they were given the thickest drink of Guinness, which they said was like drinking treacle. Of course, they drove back to Catsfield in truck and motorbike!

Working there also interested my father's mother, Nellie Roberts, also of Catsfield, as her family like so many local families boosted their income by hop-picking on the local hop-farms.

I don't know whether any accounts record the Philcox engineering involvement but thought I would just let you know what an important time of work it was for our family business being commissioned to work for Guinness, and the interest it brought us all.

*[Note by Keith. I was not aware of the work Philcox and Sons did on the hop drying equipment in the oasts. Does anyone have any recollection of this?]*

In reply to my appeal above,

### **Mike Armitage has replied with the following:-**

Penny Philcox has revived a few memories, I think I can just about remember some of her family's work...!

In the mid sixties, Dad (Phil Armitage, Engineer at GHF), had started to put in new presses which took over from the old types which would fill the pockets from the top floor. (These would have originally been operated by hand, but were then mechanised, and a good job they were too)! The issue was to reduce further the size of the pockets and make them more manageable for storage and loading on the lorries for Park Royal.

The prototype was at Udiam, in the oast on the lane just up from the Junction Rd opposite Frank Jarvis's house. The method was to have a tubular steel form about 6ft x 2ft, and this was built in two sections which were lined with the hop hessian. Imagine a pipe being cut lengthways on both sides and then clamped together before the press mechanism pushed downwards. As the pressure was very much greater, this was necessary to get the hops in safely without bursting the pocket! I can remember these first pockets coming off, and sewn up as usual, and they really were rock hard!

The engineering work carried out on these early presses was superb, as there were many safety

issues to be addressed with all that heavy machinery being employed! Later designs used more heavy timber, and the pockets were formed as oblongs, again, very hard and easy to stack, but the principle was the same. Also, there would have been a lot of additional structural steel required to strengthen the drying floors! I can well remember the ominous creaking from above...

I'm not sure who worked on the rolling trolleys which were used in the early seventies. Marsh Engineering did a lot of work, with Ian Eldridge in charge. These involved drying the hops in moveable trays, around 12ft square and 3ft deep, which were rolled over the heat, (in the place when the older 'hair' would have been laid). When the hops were dry, they were rolled back, and with a system rather like a venetian blind at the bottom, the dried hops were then dropped out onto the floor ready for the heavy pressing! Ernie Seeley and I designed some of these in 1974/5.

Around that time, Guinness were also experimenting with the continuous drying processes, developed in Belgium, which were just huge dryers with continuous belts of hops! I worked on the big one at Braces Leigh, which Ernie Seeley designed. I'm not sure if there were other engineering projects associated with these new dryers, but when the heavy presses were being put in, Philcox and Sons would certainly have been involved. They might well have been there when the continuous loaders were put into all the picking machines. These involved doubling up the loading bays in the machines for the initial chain hoist up high in the machine shed, and the bines then ran by gravity towards the primary picking tines. I often had to work up high in the Crows Nest in the roof, where a solenoid directed the two tracks into one before the descent into the pickers!

Just as an aside, I'm sure that Philcox used to be specialists in fire hoods for inglenook fireplaces, and we would have bought several of these when I worked for a builder in Rye! They were a great business back then, and I'm delighted to see them still thriving!