

HOPPING TIME IN MARDEN



“The hop pickers were families from Marden – school did not start until after the hop picking was finished at the end of September. Because Marden was one of the busiest hop growing areas, hop pickers from London came by train to help”



This booklet has been prepared by Roger and Jenny Mallion as a permanent record of the “Hopping” exhibition held in Marden Library and Heritage Centre. Opened on the 10th July 2015 by Peter Hall.

Hopping in Kent

Twiddling, lobbing, hovering up, dressing, stringing, training – yes, you’ve guessed it; Hops and Hopping is the subject. Methods of stringing and other various procedures differed according to location, East Kent being different to the Weald.

Hops were known from Roman Times, the young shoots eaten as a delicacy. It is said that they grow so fast that if you had a couple of hours to spare then you could watch them grow (9 inches in 24 hours). They are a very labour intensive crop, which has in time led to their decline. Therefore it could be a make or break crop financially, according to the weather.

Hopping had a major effect on Marden and the surrounding villages. There was the annual exodus from London of the hop-pickers with their 3/- (three shilling) train ticket, bringing even the tin bath with them. Hop picking seemed to be an occupation that transcended class. There were even ladies who picked for charity.

Marden had its Hoppers Hospital – very aptly sited where we now have our Medical Centre.

Let’s hope that hop growing won’t disappear entirely. We still have the oast houses albeit that many of them are now just “houses”.

Preparing the Hop Garden

Future generations may wonder why so much intense labour went into the production of hops. Acquiring this harvest every September needed virtually a full twelve months of work from the farm owners, workers and associated trades.

Work began in January when, originally, heavy horses and later tractors would be used to prepare the soil. In February the workers would prepare the hop poles. Old growth was cut from the hop hills in March and the hop poles were planted in the gardens.



Hops are grown on bines which climb up rough core yarn strung between pegs in the ground and hooked onto wire lattice at say twelve feet above. The string is bought in great big balls which have to be thrown into the pond to soak before being strung up from a ground peg for the hops to grow up. As the string dries out it tightens up. A stringer with a pole can string about an acre a day for which he was paid piece work.

Strings and overhead wiring were attached to the poles in April. The method alternated between using poles with hooks and stilts which were used to reach the highest points.

It was a very skilled job to get the wires up and make sure the garden was structurally sound. (Peter Tipples)

The hop plants (setts) were planted on a square 6’6” x 6’6”.





The Growing Hops

From May to September continual attention was given to the burgeoning hop plants. The farm women trained the bines and the male labourers, with a heavy horse team, turned the soil between the hop poles.

In June, in forest and wooded areas locally, kilns were created for the burning of charcoal needed later to fuel the furnaces in the oast houses.

Stilts were used again in July, when protective netting was put up around the hops. When fully grown (with the bines having climbed up to the wirework above) the hops began to form on the laterals and matured there by the end of the month. August was used to prevent any diseases taking hold and the square setts meant that the growth could be cultivated and mechanically sprayed in both directions.

There were a lot of problems involved in growing hops, they were a highly intensive crop and prone to diseases (Peter Tipples).

In the first three weeks of September the fully ripened hops were harvested by the hop pickers and the harvest was taken to the oast houses to be dried.

As the year came to a close, the fields were prepared with the burning of the unwanted bines and the stacking of the hop poles, for the process to begin again in the coming year.



Annual Hop-stringing Competition in Kent

In 1955, the Annual Hop Stringing Competition was held at Heartsfield Farm, Marden, organised by the Weald of Kent Ploughing Match Association. Fifty competitors took part and the contest was said to be like a giant knitting contest carried out with miles of string and “needles” in the form of 10ft long poles.

The Judge gave last minute instructions to the “stringers” during the contest.

The Stringing Sheds

Twyman's stringing sheds had six machines in one shed, four in another and six in another. Bales used to come in from India, 52/54 skeins per bale of raw coconut fibre. (It made the workers hands very sore). They pulled out the skeins which were done up with string then threaded them into the machines. If it had been a wet season in India there was a lot of salt in the fibre. They used to find tiny dried up crocodiles in there and tiny ear rings from the Indian girls. They stacked the finished balls up and lorries would come and take them away. In the winter time it got very cold, dusty and dirty. The workers had a fire to burn all the odd bits of string etc. at the back of the sheds where they used to heat wrapped potatoes, onions and chipolatas to warm them up. Some drank Brandy.

Sutton's sheds had different machines to Twymans. Some made spools, some made balls. They had wheels whereas Twymans had funnels but they all did the same job.

Hop Pickers Arrive

Both hop and fruit farming depended on a large amount of labour at harvest time and this was provided by the railways. Special trains, "hop picker specials" were run during the hop picking season. Many of the hop pickers were families from Marden. School did not start until after the hop picking had finished at the end of September but much of the additional labour required came from London, where poor families would come down to a working holiday. Often, mothers and children would come down for the whole period, staying in hop pickers huts provided by the farmers and would be joined at the weekends by those men who had to work during the week.

The same families came back year after year to the same huts on the same farms, generations down. They always sang and carried sticks because they were afraid of the dark. (George Flisher).



Memories of hop picking in Kent by Reg Waters

Every summer as we finished school we would go to the hop fields in Kent. The whole family would get the train from London Bridge. It was a steam train and you could smell the smoke and steam and if you looked out of the window you would get bits of dust in your eyes. The part of Kent we went to was a lovely place. We would go into the local village of Marden or Yalding and every Friday the Salvation Army used to come to the farm and bathe the children for a penny each.....

Every night we would stop work at 5pm and go back to the farm where I would help my mum to do the tea, light the fire and get water. My job was to peel the potatoes and clean the veg but there was always time for a laugh. The huts were very small and the younger children would eat inside and the older ones would eat outside. If it was raining, we would all eat in a big place called the "cookhouse". In the evening we would go and play in the fields at football or cricket until it got too dark.....

One man used to bring his piano down in his motor at the weekend and we'd all sit round the fire at night and sing songs when the men went down to the pub for a drink. A man would come down with fish and chips and jellied eels. As there were so many in my family we had to share the fish and chips.....

My dad fought in the First World War but he did not have to go in the Second World War so at weekends he would come down and see us all. We looked forward to that because he would bring money for my mum and sweets for all of us.....

All the farmers knew that picking by hand was better than machines as machines damaged the hops. The first time we heard that machines were going to do the work, everyone was upset because nobody knew who would get a letter telling them that they would not be allowed to go down to the hop garden.....

I still go down to Kent even though our farm has been sold and the houses and oast houses have been changed into new developments for people to live in. I go back to the farm and see all the people I know, some still work there.

IT WAS THE BEST TIME OF OUR LIVES

Workers in the Hop Gardens





The Poke Boy

I had left school when I was fourteen and was looking for a job. Someone had told me that a local farmer wanted extra labour for “hopping” or helping with the harvest.

I applied for the job, the farmer said he wanted a “poke boy” and did I know anything about hops? “Yes, I have been hop picking with my mother for three or four seasons, and I had picked half a “bin” on my own. “Well that’s a good start. We start work at seven in the morning until five. It’s a full time job and your wages will be eighteen shillings (90p) a week with extra for overtime and if your work and time keeping is OK there might be a job for you after hop picking. We are starting picking next Monday so if you want the job, you can start then”.

I arrived at the farm at seven o’clock on the dot, full of excitement at the prospect of starting my first proper job, but also apprehensive as to whether or not I could do it.

My duties entailed general help with any of the tasks in the hop garden, such as moving the “bins” into which the hops were picked, helping to pull bines which the pickers found too tough to pull, or even pulling them down from the wires above. Also I had to distribute the “pokes” to make sure there was one near to each bin. Pokes are big hessian sacks about six feet long and four feet wide, which held ten bushels of freshly picked hops, with plenty of room to spare to avoid crushing.



What Next?



Pokes being delivered to the oast house and a man with a hop pocket on the right.



After the hops were picked, they were taken to the oast house. The hops were placed on the kiln which had a fire beneath so that the hot air could rise through the drying hops. The kilns had a cowl at the top which swung away from the wind so that the hot air could circulate.

After drying on the kiln for about nine hours, the hops were spread on the drying floor which consisted of a latticed floor of wood and wire onto which the hops were laid to cool for a few hours.

They had to be raked over to allow them to dry right through. Afterwards, they are packed down into large sacks or pockets which were then stitched up and loaded on to a lorry to go to the station, to the train, or to the nearby brewery. The pocket had the name of the farm printed on it so that the brewery would know where the hops had come from.



The Hop Pickers Hospital – site is now Marden Medical Centre



Hoppers and Health

From at least the middle of the 19th Century, people came from London by road and rail to Marden and other Kent villages to pick hops which were used to flavour beer. Families were accommodated by the farmers in wooden huts with galvanised iron roofs, each being about 14 feet square in size and housing 12 to 14 people. Cooking was done over camp fires or in a cookhouse and there were no washing facilities. The water was often polluted and people had to drink water from streams. It was thus very easy for gastrointestinal diseases to spread rapidly in the encampments.

In 1849, 43 hop pickers died from cholera in East Farleigh while in Marden there was an increase in the number of burials of children under 10 years and young adults. It is not known whether these were due also to cholera.

The insanitary conditions of the hop pickers persisted until the 1920s when the County Medical Officer of Health, Dr Alfred Greenwood advised that they should be provided with safe drinking water and an adequate number of lavatories.

Culinary Uses for Hops

Hop shoots were a delicacy from Roman times and they are still prepared rather like asparagus.

Old recipe for Buttered Hop Tops

Before May, gather the young hop shoots about four leaves down and soak them in a bowl of cold water with a handful of salt. Drain and plunge into enough white water to cover hops easily and boil rapidly. When they are tender, drain the water off immediately and chop them up in the hot pan with pepper, salt and a lump of butter. Serve hot.

Hop Sauce

Prepare as above and chop into a previously prepared butter sauce. Serve with chicken, fish or mutton.

Medicinal Uses as Sleep Pillows

Hops are well known for improving sleep as they appear to have soporific qualities. The best known method is to sleep on a pillow stuffed with hops. In these days lavender is also added. George III apparently was advised to try it and it was said to have worked.

Some people entering an oast during hop drying were said to have fallen asleep.

Another method of inducing sleep was to inhale steam from an infusion of hops.

Hops were believed to have protective and healing qualities. Sprays of hops were carried before assize judges on prison visits to protect them from the foul air.

The Exhibition was based upon the need to record Marden's long history of hop growing.

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