



It used to be a working summer holiday for impoverished EastEnders. But a determined bunch of assorted characters still descends on Kent every September to pick hops. By Mark Piggott

'My mother first came hopping in 1897,' says Ada, a tough East Ender in her late Seventies. 'Last year they had a celebration of our hundred years on the hop, with cakes and everything.' Her husband Wally, a fierce former lorry driver with a bristling moustache, continues: 'Everyone would set off in pony traps; whole families would turn up for the harvest. Everyone lived in tents, or slept on straw in the pokes. They were real hoppers, not like this bunch.'

By 'this bunch' Wally is referring to the assorted characters who still descend on rural Kent each year to pick hops for a few weeks, in exchange for free accommodation and cash in hand.

Workers have been coming to pick hops in Kent for centuries, traditionally from London's East End but now from all over the world. Yet still, among all the New Age travellers and foreign exchange students, there are many working class Londoners for whom the annual pilgrimage is a paid holiday away from the inner city. There is plenty of work both in the fields, driving tractors and in the sheds.

I am employed as a hanger, working in the shed hooking the long, thick hop stems to a conveyor belt which constantly feeds into a huge shredder. The hops are small, round pods attached to a thick, sinewy stem that is rough on the hands and highly irritating to the skin. For many, the smells emanating from the hops are overpowering, and it isn't hard to imagine how tough the work must have been before the days of tractors and conveyor belts. The hooks on the belt come around fast, and every time you miss

one or the stem falls out onto the floor, Wally bellows his wrath into your ear like Alf Garnett. 'Don't mind old Wally,' says Roy, a humorous Dubliner in his thirties, 'his bark is worse than his bite.' Unlike many of the workers, for Roy this is only his second time to the same farm outside Faversham. 'We were in Australia for six years. I did a degree in horticulture, then I was in Holland for three. I travel about in the ambulance with my girlfriend. We just came back from Czechoslovakia, and straight here. The hop harvest lasts about a month. We love it here, the people are real characters.'

As if to illustrate his point, two bikers from Sheffield arrive on a Harley-Davidson. Matt and Adam are shattered, having spent the previous night at a motorway service station outside Peterborough after their bike broke down. 'Don't give yer real name when they ask you,' says Adam, who in both voice and appearance bears an uncanny resemblance to Jarvis Cocker. 'You're what they call a hanger, so we'll call you Mark Hanger. It's very rare for the Social to do a swoop, but if they do, just give a false name and address.'

Apart from Matt and Adam, there are several others from Sheffield, mainly redundant miners who see the opportunity to earn , 36 a day in your hand a good reason to travel South with the birds each September. There are workers from everywhere: from Spain, from Italy- even Pepe, who claims to be a Portuguese policeman, and Sue, a young Malaysian student who is studying for a degree in computing.

'All my friends went home to Malaysia for summer,' says Sue brightly, 'but I had no money so I came here to work. Any way, you get to meet real English people, not only students. Everyone is very friendly, I like it here very much.'

Pay on this particular farm is good, at £4 an hour the rate set down by the farm unions and Ministry for Agriculture, Farming and Fisheries (Maff) But, says the farm manager, Pat Goode, 'competition from other farms is slowly forcing us out of business. Some of the Northern farms up around Lincolnshire and East Anglia pay less than two quid an hour, mainly to locals on the dole and illegal immigrants who can't complain.

“Let’s go to the hops, everybody” / Independent / 11 September 1998

We've already had to stop growing cauliflower and other vegetables. We just can't compete. Hops are still profitable, as they go mainly into brewing, and this weekend we're sending samples to America, but they're only harvested for three weeks in the year.'

Although the business may have shrunk from Wally and Ada's day, there are still huge fields of hops, 15 foot stems in long straight rows with names like Fuggles, Goldings and Challenger, all around this idyllic corner of Kent. Increased mechanisation and stricter employment laws means there are less families now, and children have to be content to play in the empty fields. 'I've been coming down to Faversham for over 50 years,' reminisces Ada. 'I've brought my kids and grandkids down. It used to be a kind of paid holiday, but now we come here more to see our friends than anything else.'

'In the old days, all the kids would be singing in the rows: it was like a big happy picnic. Later, when work was over, we'd all sit round the campfire telling stories. We'd all sing hymns, that was lovely. And in the pub up the village there'd be hundreds of us round the old piano singing and having a good laugh.'

The conviviality of the farm is striking to the outsider. There are about 30 staying in the barn, in tents and camper vans, and a somewhat drab row of rooms in a pre-fab outside on which hangs the sign 'Bangk-hop Hilton'. Part of the community feeling is due to the fact that so many return here year on year. But the largest proportion of hop workers are locals (whose accents are sometimes completely impenetrable) and East Londoners. In the village pubs each evening (now only two of them), city slickers and country cousins enjoy a mutual respect and understanding. Over the years, a number of relationships have sparked between the two tribes, some of them resulting in marriage. It isn't long before Helen from Romford is trying to fix me up with a local girl called Jeanette. 'You could do a lot worse,' says Helen, 'she's a well-built girl.'

Helen, now 47, has been coming down to Kent on and off since she was three months old.

'Traditionally it's the women and kids who come down; the men all come straight from work on a

Friday night for their "marital dues". Helen's husband Ted, a mild-mannered double glazing manufacturer from Chelmsford, grins as he sips his bitter. 'He comes down more for the beer than for me,' says Helen.

In a brave attempt to fan the flames of romance, Helen has managed to borrow a hot dog van from a friend in the village for a Saturday night barbecue. Saturday is the highlight of the week: we rise at 6am for a 6:45am start and Matt and Adam's breakfast consists of a straight whiskey. You finish at 12, have a hot shower in the somewhat dilapidated toilets, and wait for your wages and the beer man. Pat, the farm manager, duly arrives with pay packets for all the workers. The beer man is next, arriving with crates of lager straight off the ferry and extremely cheap. This year there is simply too much work to do. The tradition of migrant labour is an ancient one in the Garden of England, that part of the nation which Le Shuttle seems to bypass in time as well as space, and as long as you are away from the village by the end of September, you will be welcomed back with open arms next year.

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