

## Hop story

It was a Friday late September 1960 and I was eight. It was the time when Poperinge still had 5,000 acres of hop land, and a few years before the harvesters took over. I felt tired but excited when I got out of bed that morning. Today was the last day of hop picking and the 'spread' would be on tonight. Still, another long day in the field before all that.

And yet, what else could I do? Nearly all working-class families in the area went hop picking. That was a long-running tradition going back to the Middle Ages. You never question traditions, certainly not if they are good ones. Besides, you went hop picking because everybody did it. After all, farmers needed the work force to get the hops in on time, and of course it brought in some welcome extra cash. Once again, we wouldn't be cold, as the coal man could now bring in the new load for the coming winter. If we were lucky again, mum would allow us some pocket money from our earnings. Last year I got a new school satchel and my sister - finally - her first blue jeans!

Going hop picking meant that you had to get up early in the morning. Most families were already in the gardens by 7 a.m., which meant that you had to be up before 6. Mum for her part was up and about before dawn, packing piles of sandwiches and collecting raincoats, umbrellas, sunhats, mittens and other stuff we might need for a full day in the gardens. September is an odd month weather-wise; it can be a real scorcher but it can also be a wet and chilly month. With time, you tend to remember the sunny days and the picnics in the gardens, though I can still smell that horrible horse sausage we had (everybody had garlic horse sausage in those days!).

As most farms lay a few miles out of town it meant that you needed to add half an hour to get there on your bike, as few families had cars then. I remember the mist hanging over low-lying fields as we cycled to our hop farm in the morning silence. By the time you got there, some hoppers had already started work. They were the die-hards, the record-breakers, the people who would go for 50 pounds a day. The farmer had been pulling bines from dawn, and that meant that the hops would be cold and wet. But soon the sun would rise with the promise of a warm, balmy day.

Families sat down in the gardens where the bines had been pulled. Mum used to sit in the middle with my sister and me on either side. She would pick in an 'adult' basket while we were given a smaller wicker bushel. Everything went into the same huge gunny bag, which would be weighed at the end of the day (you got paid by weight, rather than per hour).

For us, kids, hop picking was a frightfully tedious job though adults too tried to break the monotony of the dreadfully drab days in the field doing the same job for hours on end. Kids would catch ladybirds, tell riddles or play pranks on each other whereas the adults would sing songs, tell jokes (which I didn't always understand) and have farting competitions.

One thing you couldn't (and wouldn't) do was play with the tinkers' kids. Scores of gypsies had settled around the farms for hop picking long before the harvest. They didn't have the best of reputations, to say the least, but were valued for their working speed and for certain trades local people couldn't do like knife-grinding, basket repairs and patching up leaky kettles. I remember the fiery-eyed mothers surrounded by scores of young kids in rags, all sporting a runny nose.

As for their older sisters, it was rumoured that *"if you spat on them it would sizzle"*. But then again if you did, you'd have to reckon with an irate dad, wielding a long flick knife! Being a bit too young to understand the expression we, kids, stuck to simple games among each other, while in the afternoon the youngest of us would be put to sleep on the soft gunny bags, oblivious of the bustle around them. Anyway, all tomfoolery would be over and out with when the farmer came round to inspect.

He first checked your method of picking. You had to use your thumb and your forefinger to pluck the flowers (or 'cones' as we called them) neatly from the stems. No leaves and no stalks! All spilled and scattered cones had to be picked up and put in the bine. That was known as 'cleaning your nest'.

The highlight of the day was the lunch break. The foreman would come to the field carrying a yoke. From each side hung a bucket of soup (bean or pea soup was the universal hop pickers' soup, hence the f... competitions). The farmer himself would wheel in a barrow with a big copper of freshly-boiled potatoes. It was the tiny ones that the farmer couldn't sell to the brokers. So these went to the hoppers or to the pigs. He also brought in a kettle of weak coffee, and if the weather was really hot a jug of beer that we called Boys' Bitter. Everybody got a ladle of the beverage of their choice, and no sandwich would be left in mum's holdall, as working in the outside invariably worked up a healthy appetite.

Afternoons were just a repetition of mornings, with the difference that you got even more tired and sweaty with the sun rising high in the sky. Hands got chafed, wrists got bruised and fingers got dirty with the oils in the hop flowers. Arms and legs got a rash from this prickly plant and from handling the coarse bines. Fortunately, mum always kept a tin of *Gercuria* ointment in her handbag if need be, though old ladies would try to prevent the rash by using mittens or even an old sock which they cut the tip out of, and which they pulled over their wrist.

Fortunately, the work stopped for kids after 6. Now, the farmer would bring in his scales and start weighing the bags of the different families. Many families went on picking after that, because sometimes the husband would come round after his job, and join in for an hour or two. These bags would be left overnight in the gardens and covered with a tarpaulin to keep the moisture in.

In the meantime the drying was going on in the oast-house. All the hops of the day had been loaded onto the kiln by now. I can smell the scent of drying hops now, an indescribable fragrant smell that I can only define as 'somewhere between roast apple and blooming geranium'. For who ever went hop picking it became a scent that cannot be erased from their memory.

Today, however, was special. It was the last day of the harvest and... pay-day! At 6 p.m. everybody went to the farmhouse, the farmer or his wife would call out your surname and pay your earnings according to the collective weight you had amassed in the previous weeks. Now, all the families went home early for a wash and a clean-up but everybody was back by 8.

Then the long-awaited 'spread' was on. The farmer and his wife would treat everybody to Dutch loaf with coffee, or hot cocoa for the kids. After the meal, tables and chairs were shoved aside and someone with an accordion would start the dance. Pickers, young and old, would join in, and both beer and short drinks flowed freely - and free.

Goggle-eyed I used to stare at this incredible spectacle. Elderly people whirling like dervishes, falling over after a wild waltz. Men slapping women's bottoms, fat women sweating profusely. The boisterous atmosphere in the farmhouse became sultry with the perspiration of this 'madding crowd', and soon we would leave the room to join the foreman into the dark of night.

Singing and in droves we went back to the field to witness the hop guy, a straw dummy, being 'hanged' from the last pole of the field, and set alight. In a way it looked like an execution, our revenge against Nature, for weeks of pent-up frustration and endless toil under the burning sun. And we would dance and sing around the guy until the last embers of the bonfire had died out.

The next day the landscape around Poperinge had an almost eerie feel. After the sight of lush hanging gardens, the fields now looked almost deserted with only the bare poles to show where the hops had been. To me, the end of the hop harvest spelled the beginning of a new phase in the year. Days would be getting shorter now, and above all the spectre of school was looming around the corner. Adults too would ponder the future and conclude their conversations with the inevitable prediction of '*harvest in - autumn will begin*'.