

Mrs. Kathleen Ash

Mrs Ash[A]: I got this book signed by Robin Malton, the author.

D: How did you get that?

A: Through Whitbread's, because this is where we used to pick.

D: So, you're one of the posh pickers. What's that?

A: This is something, I think it's probably how Robin Moreton got in touch with me because it is about...

D: 27th September 198...

A: It might be '87. I think it is. But what happened was, my mother and my brother's mother-in-law and my daughter's mother-in-law all old Whitbread pickers. And hop pickings virtually finished, hasn't it? It has now, but it had over the years, you saw it decline. And one day I was sitting indoors, and I thought. Wouldn't it be lovely if these three could go back to Whitbread's and pick as they used to? And I don't know whatever made me do it, it was just a sudden whim, so I wrote to Whitbread's and I went on holiday just after that, and I honestly forgot all about it. Well because I've been on holiday, when I came back one day there was a card there, "Please get in touch immediately." So, I got in touch with Whitbread's at Paddock Wood, and they said, "Oh we've been trying to get hold of you. We're very interested and the televisions very interested as well. It would be lovely." So, we come to some arrangement and we went down there. The difference was instead of going on the lorry or in the train, these three and myself went by Rolls Royce. That was the difference! It was Thames Television, Andrew Gardiner; they came to where my mother lived at Pagoda Gardens, at Blackheath.

So, they went up there, actually it was Michaels my son's car. So, they've gone up to my mum, and they'd already interviewed my mum, and they filmed her getting in the car. And then first we went to the pub at Beltring, it's called the Bell. And did an interview there with the television. And then they filmed us arriving on the Whitbread's Farm, chap opened the gate and he saluted. And we got onto the farm and we were met by the manager. They were taken to a bin, an old-fashioned bin, and the hops had been pulled down and put over ready for them to pick. And there were a few school children around, which they were able to show them what to do. Well, it was such a lovely day - Whitbread's laid on a lunch as well. And we've got two videos: One was Andrew Gardiner and ITN, the other one was TVS - they wanted to get in on the act and re-enact coming back onto the farm. I thought you would be interested; I've not only got that one, I've got another one. But my photos my daughter has got, she's on holiday; but I can bring them up again, well as soon as you want them. Next week.

D: Is that one of your old photos?

A: That is her when she was young. That's Mrs Mathews, my daughter's mother-in-law. That's her, and that's her daughter and son-in-law. That's their little boy. In the bin.

D: Is that his bucket?

A: Yes. That used to encourage the kids to pick in the bucket. Michael was born there, hop picking. I went into the hospital from there, because the blitz had started. That's something different isn't it? I'm 71 now.

D: Tell me about yourself, when you first went hopping?

A: When I first went hop picking, I used to go with my mother. There were seven of us. And my father worked in the docks. Fortunately, he did have a regular job, which was unusual in those days. The '20's. And he was a very good father, the household came first. Not like some of the men when they earned it didn't go in the home did it? Everybody was different. My father was a good father and a good husband. Looked after us seven kids, but of course, we didn't get holidays. So, hop picking was grand, for us to be able to go there. Especially when it was really nice and you could be out all day, no school. Lovely.

Hop picking, unfortunately, came about the end of August, when you were more or less ready; you had your summer holidays from school ready to go back. Well, the schools didn't really take all that notice in those days. If they did, they didn't press anything. So, we were all able to go. Until I went to a central school. In those days you sat for the scholarship. If anybody passed - we passed - you went to a grammar school. And your school that you were leaving put your name on an honours board. There was a halfway school that you could go, it was the central school, and even now I believe that was the best of the two. Because the grammar school really went out to make you teachers. But the central schools did shorthand and typing and bookkeeping, and needlework. You were well fitted out for life in our areas, as we were; we were all poor. So, I went to one of these schools and then of course I couldn't go hop picking, because you couldn't leave that school to go. You'd have been in trouble. They would have done in those days, so people didn't do it. They just didn't do it. So of course, all my brothers and sisters used to go, and I used to stay with my grandmother, and my grandfather. Again, in those days, everybody lived near each other, you never ever moved far away ever. Ever. So, my grandmother lived in this house, number 15, and my mother lived in number 7. That was Eugenia Road SE16, near Surrey Docks. My father worked in the docks. And that was the starting of the hop picking.

My mother did go before that, with her mother. But after she got married, my father didn't like the idea very much at all. He didn't mind so much once the children had come along because they came a bit thick and fast. And really it was best they had a holiday and my mum had a change, and you earned some money. There was never a lot of money, but in comparison, the cost of living, it was a fortune. And it helped you perhaps even get the Christmas things. Because you would be there three weeks to a month. Some of the smaller farms you would be there five weeks or six weeks even.

D: Why?

A: Because Whitbread's had more modern technology, everything. They did have horse drawn wagons that used to bring the hops back from the fields. But they were far more mechanised.

They were in advance of everywhere. So, I think that helped to make the hop picking shorter. They probably employed far more people. They had more fields to pick, but they employed many more people. We, even in those days, had hot water and showers. Yes. they were primitive I suppose but they used to have one night for the women, and one night for the men and the next night for the women, and then night for the men.

D: That's amazing.

A: Oh yes. They were very primitive, but they were showers. They were lovely. I must give it to Whitbread's, because they really were ahead of their time.

D: Was it difficult to get onto the Whitbread farm?

A: Yes. It was. Usually it was handed down from families. Yes, it was.

D: So, you had to marry into a family to get onto the Whitbread farm?

A: Usually. It was more in the lines of that than anything else. You did have a job to get on there.

D: So how many generations back had your family been going?

A: I would say at least three generations. Before that, I cannot go before that. But I really don't know.

D: So, your grandmother would have been at Whitbread?

A: Yes.

D: And her mother?

A: Yes.

D: So that's going back into the last century?

A: Yes. It wasn't called Whitbread's then. I think it was called Whites, or it was Mr White. You'll read that in there.

D: Were there anybody down at Whitbread's that working there still that you would have remembered from when you were down there?

A: No. I went there a little while ago. It's a museum now. Actually, there are pictures of me in there, picking at the bin, in one of the oast houses. I think they've still got fields, but I think they are picked by machinery.

D: When did you stop picking?

A: I was there during the blitz. I didn't take a bin that year because I was so heavy pregnant, because Michael was born in September, the 27th September. Blitz had been on twenty days. And Michael was born there. So, I didn't take a bin to work there, but I went down with my mother. My mother was there. We went for a holiday really. Actually, the day we went, the blitz started, September 7th. My husband had got an unexpected holiday he was working at Woolwich Arsenal in the high explosive department, and they worked full out through the summer. And I think they must have either got ahead of themselves or they were told that they could have a holiday; he got that week. He said, "Let's go down to your mum." And we did, we went there that day, that Saturday. We got there in the afternoon, one o'clock, two o'clock, something like that. And before teatime, the bombers were going over, and bombed Surrey Docks where I came from.

D: That was a lucky escape.

A: Yes. And the house where I lived, I was going to have the baby at home - because you could have them, you could choose. I was having the baby at home. And being under the local midwife all this time. So, going away as late as September 7th, all the clean curtains were up, everything was ready for when I came back, in case it started. Well, the curtains were ripped to smithereens, and no windows left or anything. Which was another reason I stayed, because, there was fighting going on overhead all the time, and there was planes brought down there. But we weren't - you were in the open, it wasn't quite so bad as being in London when you were a target. The docks were all alright. It was a dreadful thing. That night all I heard was the bombers going over. Because I wasn't there.

D: So, you must have known they were going there?

A: Yes. Because somebody came, and we were told that that's what it was, it was London, and all round the docks had caught it very badly. They said, "Well you'd best stay." So off I toddled up to Pembury Hospital, and they said, "Oh yes, that's fine. If it all starts you come here." Well it was on the last day - the picking finished - and everybody used to go to the local pub, the Bell, and have a drink, and say goodbye until next year, because everybody was aunts down there. Everybody. It was a big, big family. It was a lovely time, hop picking, it was a lovely time. And I was left there with my little girl of three, my husband's there, and I think my younger sisters were there, when it all started. And my husband went up to my mother, it was about ten o'clock, they were all coming home anyway. And the farm manager, a Mr Waghorn, and my husband, went there to phone for an ambulance. And it came and it had to make a big detour because there were unexploded bombs. And I said, "I've got an unexploded bomb." And we got to the hospital and we got there in the early hours of the Friday morning, but Michael wasn't born until the evening, until twenty past six. So, I would have had time, but I didn't know that. During that time, I was in there, several times people in the upstairs ward were brought down under our beds, because of the fighting went on in Kent, the aerodrome. I was in the hospital for ten days.

D: So, they actually brought the patients underneath?

A: Yes.

D: You had like a bunk bed?

A: Yes. Really. They just put them down under there while the raids were on. That was Pembury Hospital.

D: Were you frightened?

A: Yes. I was more frightened to think because I got a son and I was a bit scared that something would happen to him. So, the next day, everybody had gone home, and I didn't get any visitors all the week. My husband was back at work, second, he couldn't afford the fair to go anyway. And the lady in the next bed was a local lady and her husband came in, and she felt so sorry for me, she gave me two bars of chocolate. I came home from there with Michael ten days old and I had to make some arrangements to evacuate. Because my mother had gone to Devon, it was so bad she went with my two young sisters and my little girl of three. And I had to make some arrangements; you were able to travel free if you had a voucher. And so, my husband took me up to Waterloo Station about six o'clock one morning, dreadful morning, and there's poor Michael in his shawl about three weeks old, I went down to Devon where they were, just outside Barnestaple. And I stayed there until the February and my husband got his calling up papers.

A: That's the story of when Michael was born down there and he loves hop picking. To such an extent that he wishes with all his heart that there were places around. I believe there are somewhere, tucked away somewhere, there are places where you could go to pick hops. But he loved it as a kid, went back every year.

D: When did you start going back?

A: I went back again directly the war was over, and we could go. I'm not sure if I went - no I didn't go in '45 because I had a baby in November '45. Five years between Michael and Steven. So, I didn't go that year, but I went the following year. I went every year. Up until - no what happened? One year there was a big hop failure; the crops failed, and Whitbread's put names in a hat and pulled so many out. And mine wasn't one of them. Or my mother, who'd been going there for a long time. That's just one of those things. But we went to another farm at Matfield. It was owned by Mr Thomsett. That was at Matfield. It was only one - we lived on Bell Common, which was a huge place of these huts.

D: The area of the huts was called Bell Common?

A: Yes. That was our common, Bell Common. And they had another one it was called Tent Common, going back to when there were tents all those years back. And the Whitbread huts, the

top part, were wooden. And some of them behind that were corrugated iron. And they had an upstairs. They had like a ladder, going up to an upstairs...

D: That was unusual wasn't it?

A: Oh yes. Whitbread's was. There was a platform downstairs that was put up on which you put your bed. You didn't actually sleep on the floor. See they did years and years and years ago. So, at first, we used to take the big mattress covers and they would provide straw. So, you filled them up with straw. And you did the same upstairs. So, you had a big bed upstairs that went the whole width up until the stair, which was like a ladder type stair. And that kept it much tidier than when you slept on the floor. But then as the years went on as you went out in a lorry you would load it up with your mattress. Also, lots of people had calor gas stoves, which we didn't. We still used to cook under, called it the cookhouse. And they provided you with faggots - that was the wood. And you used to be up early in the morning, and you'd get a faggot under and light it up - make sure you had a lot of dry wood, you would do that overnight, heap it inside your hut. So you went out in the morning, your paper and your dry sticks, and you got it going and you put your faggot on top, whoosh, and the pot would boil and you'd make the tea, and you had enough hot water to wash the kids, without going up. But you could walk up to a tent, you could get your hot water all the time. Take the bucket and get big bucket of hot water and come back and wash the kids.

D: Must have been a very good thing?

A: A boon.

D: Was it because Whitbread, they believed in taking care of the workers?

A: Probably had a lot to do with it. I mean you didn't get told about all that. I don't know, sometimes they're like that aren't they?

A: You picked five bushels for a shilling in old money. A bushel is a basket, like that. You'll probably see a little basket in there.

D: How long did it take you to fill a bushel?

A: In a day with one person picking you might get twenty bushels. With one person picking. A shilling for five bushels.

D: So, you'd get four shillings a day?

A: Yes. Sometimes if you had two or three round a bin, you could really get on and earn. But then again...

D: Is that...?

A: That's a basket.

D: So that's a bushel basket?

A: Yes. There was a mark in there. A ring. Which was the bushel mark. And everybody used to watch to make sure they didn't out any over there.

D: Was there any arguments when they came to see how much you picked?

A: There you are, this is all about Whitbread's. That's my mum. That was my sister with her little one.

D: When was that taken?

A: About 44 years ago.

D: You carried on picking after the war up until the machines came in?

A: Yes. Before the machines came in there was a flood at Whitbread's - the Medway flooded. I wasn't there that year. I don't know why. I wasn't there that year. It must be in here when it was. And there was a flood and they had to send boats round and rescue people out of the huts. And Kevin's mum, she was one of them. But Kevin's sister, the one in that picture, she's got some nice photos. I'll tell her and she could tell you a bit more about that.

D: Is this it?

A: That's right 1968, you can see how it's flooded. You'll find a lot of information in there.

D: We're interested in people's personal stories as well

A: After I got my own hut. My hut was one of the tin ones. They were ordinary corrugated iron shed huts with a platform in for a bed. But after a while I got one of these wooden huts with the upstairs, and it was right opposite, it was the tea place, it was there; my hut was there, it was the tea place it was called Sid's. And he used to do hot tea and hot pies and whacking great big cheesecakes and ooh! We came back off the field tired and you know you've got to get something going for the dinner. we would get two penn'orth of tea in a jug, being one of Sid's mates really, being right opposite, used to get a nice lot of tea in a jug. You'd sit and drink that cup of tea and the kids'd have a drop of tea, first before you got on with your dinner - which invariably was a boiled dinner. If you lit the fire and let it go right down, you could do a little bit of frying. So, then

you shared the cook house with somebody else, sometimes they had great big fire as well, and you'd get little bits of black, it never spoiled anything - in fact it was the first attempts at barbecuing. And also, going away from the actual huts at the moment, on Sundays you could walk about three miles down to the bakers and you could take your joint and the potatoes and they would bake it. The knack was, you had to walk back there at two o'clock to get it and walk back with it on a pram. We used to take a pram, put it in the pram and cover it over with a cloth. But it would get a little bit cold coming back really.

D: Did you have to race up the road with it?

D: As much as you could. That just made the change. But normally it was soups, stew, everything was boiled. You'd get a lovely meal out of boiled sausages. Potatoes with onions in them. They do these things now, but they give them such fancy names, you think, "Oh that sounds lovely." But basically, that is what they were. Something like that.

D: Where did you get the ingredients?

A: On Whitbread's Farm there were stores. There were greengrocers, stores; it was all fresh produce. There was a store that sold clothes, socks, different things. And there was a provisions tent - used to be the rations, used to take your rations book over there during the war, and line up and get your rations. There was always a provisions tent. And there was a butcher in one of the barns. And there was also a place where the Salvation Army were. They would come and mind your baby for you if you wanted - well you left your baby with them for about a penny a day.

D: Weren't they antidrink; didn't they mind being down at the brewery?

A: No. Not at all. They were more interested in people. It's not what people do; they go in the pubs and sell all their papers, the War cry and all that. They've been everywhere haven't they. They used to come round the fields in the morning with hot tea it tasted like washing up water. Michael always wanted a piece of pancake with currants in. They were excellent there, and they had like a first aid place too, Salvation Army. Then there was a bevy of Franciscan monks, I believe, because they wore the brown habits, and they would come round and look after your soul. They used to have the children there for a Sunday school. Sometimes they had a lantern. And they would sometimes do prayers and the around, and everybody joined in, even though they weren't strictly religious.

D: Was this in the evening?

A: Yes. And they would have a bin and come and pick on the field as well. Because we all used to laugh because they used to say prayers before they ate their lunch. And I could always imagine

while they're sitting there like that, somebody half inching a bit before they got there! But we were looked after at Whitbread's, really were. But you worked for it.

D: Was it hard work?

A: It wasn't hard work for me but it's monotonous and tedious. Because all you do is, you pull a bine down, you put it over your bin and then you pick. And you pick. And you pick. And you swing that bine away and then you pull another down. And you get your leaves out as much as you can. Especially the big ones. But what you did, you sent one of the kids down the line a little bit and they would pick all these branches, the lower branches, and it would be lovely and clean, and then you'd put them all over the top. I don't suppose the measurers were fooled for one moment, but you didn't have any great big leaves or that. You weren't supposed to have any bunches or any leaves. But obviously small leaves used to come off as you picked.

D: The kids...?

A: They picked completely clean. So, you put the clean ones all the way on top of yours. So, they looked lovely. But I don't think they complained. They just used to come and do the basket, whoosh. And you'd think, "Oh that was a big one." You thought you had so many. You used to get roughly three measures a day. On an average, three measures a day. Sometimes if the oasts were full it would only be two, and you'd grumble like mad, but you'd have to leave those in the bin, and they used to sink overnight, they would get heavy and kind of sink, so the next day when you went there you spent some time, whoosh, getting the air in them again and pulling them up. But mainly it was three a day.

D: Who came round to do the measuring?

A: An employee of Whitbread's. And with the measurer was a bookee. And that bookee used to put in his book what you picked, and he would put it on your card. You gave him your card, or her...

D: Was it a her sometimes?

A: Yes. So, you had a record if what you picked, and they had a record.

D: So, did you always have your record book with you when you were working?

A: Yes.

D: What happened if you lost it?

A: Well, you'd just have to tell them, and you would get another one, you'd get a new one. They knew, they had their own records anyway. Yes. Wasn't very often they were lost. I think the women guarded them.

D: Was it nearly all the women that were doing the picking?

A: Oh yes. The husbands were at work. You found a lot of the husbands took their holidays at that time, if they were holidays, and picked with you because that earned you more money, didn't it. And it was a bit of a holiday for the husband. Also, they used to do, they called it a pole pullers job. He could get employed while he was there. What they did they had a long pole with a hook on it. Often when you pulled a bine down - because they're strung on wires, across like that - you'd leave the head of it up. And he would come, you'd call out, "Heads up." And he'd come out. Or sometimes they would help you with bins when you had to move them to other places, and he would come and help you. Normally you did it all yourself.

D: How did the pole puller get paid?

A: They'd get paid a wage from Whitbread's.

D: Was it a good wage?

A: I really don't know. But probably it was acceptable because a lot of them had jobs anyway and went down there for the holiday. And those that didn't it must have been more than they would have got on the dole, or on the unemployment pay. But don't forget it was a kind of holiday as well at the same time.

D: Was there ever any dispute about people wanting to get a higher rate?

A: Yes. Sometimes there was. One time they called strike, and we came out on strike. And I think we got a little bit more per bushel, perhaps we got four a bushel instead of five.

D: How long did the strike last?

A: Oh, it didn't last long, only a few days. Nobody really wanted, but somebody had suggested it, and of course you all did. Didn't last long only a few days, but we did get an increase in the pay that time. But normally they didn't query it. I think as time went on, hop picking wasn't regarded as a place to go and earn money, as, they loved it and they still earned, but it wasn't like enough money to buy the children's' things or yours. you know it wasn't so necessary to go to earn in that sense.

D: As time went on was it more difficult for the farmer to get people to come down and work?

A: Oh no, there was never any difficulty of getting anybody to go Whitbread's because it was a real holiday, it was still a holiday. They still went to the fields, they still picked. But it wasn't the urgent need.

D: Did that make people work a bit slower?

A: No, I don't think they ever did. Because those that went it was ingrained, it was automatic, you just got on with it.

D: Did people resent it?

A: Secretly they did. You didn't like it if somebody was ahead of you really. You'd try to get a little bit more done. It was a competitive spirit really. I don't think anybody would admit it. At Whitbread's 80 years, they laid on a festival, and insisted on doing a Shakespeare play. You can imagine all hop pickers. Real actors and actresses, they were brought down by Whitbread. I remember this particular night; it was Twelfth Night. Half of them didn't understand what they were talking about.

D: Did they stay and watch it?

A: Yes. Of course. And there was a talent competition, and you'd get the hop queen. They really were very good to work for.

D: How did they judge for the hop queen?

A: Probably one of their officials. Used to get some of those that were old, they'd go in there for a game. You used to get all that; used to get lots of fun. But then you'd get a nice young girl about 16, if she wasn't necessarily a beauty, she looked it. And she would be chosen, she would be hop queen. It was very nice.

D: Did you have a big party at the end of the picking season?

A: No, you didn't have a party as such. You went to the farm office to get your money; they would tell you when the pay-out was. You were finished picking, right; you would go to the farmhouse and you would get your money - maybe the next day or maybe you'd be there for one day or two days, which gave you time to pack up and everything to come home. But then, all those that were in the little area where you were, you went and had a drink. At the Bell. You had a drink. Until next year.

D: Did you keep in touch with the people you got to know down there?

A: I think maybe one of them we kept more in touch with. But you knew you were going to see them all next year. Nobody had thought that you wouldn't go, or for any reason that you would be dead or something like that. But no, no, nobody'd thought that. And the following year the day you arrived you spent, "Oh hello!"

D: People all rushing around saying hello to each other?

A: Yes. There was one lady - these huts were in blocks of four. And the lady in that one, and the lady in this one, were both stone deaf, absolutely stone deaf. So, you can imagine, we used to get the shouting and hollering sometimes! The one in that one, aunt Jenny, used to have a real laugh.

She used to sometimes be up at three o'clock, and she would bang on the wall, not a clue what the time was, bang on the wall for Mrs Roberts, who was also stone deaf, be shouting, "Eh? What?" "It's time to get up." "Eh?" Two lovely old people. This is Mrs Roberts. This is me with my three. The lady there was aunt Pol. She had a Downs Syndrome daughter who loved to be with mine. And she would rock the pram and she would walk it up and down; she loved it. And aunt Pol's husband used to come down every weekend, they used to like to go and have a drink. And so, Joyce, the girl's name, she used to stay with me. She never ever left her with anybody. But she never minded because the children were always there, and she knew I would look after her. She was about 18 or 19. She wasn't a child. And we used to have concerts. We used to do a concert under the cookhouse. Used to have one every night if the kids weren't too tired. But otherwise it'd be perhaps Saturday, and you'd get them all come up, all the kids in song, and I used to go and play and sing, and Joyce would sing. Everybody would have a little concert.

D: Did everyone gather round the cookhouse?

A: Well, mainly your own little area. Because the most of them used to do the same.

D: Did anyone play an instrument?

A: Occasionally you'd get someone'd come down who'd have a piano accordion. But I remember once, somebody had got a piano, and they put it under the cookhouse, and they had a little party this particular night. And Saturday night mainly, you would get them all singing, coming back from the Bell. It was a bit of a walk, you had to walk from the Bell, you had to walk along the road, and you had to get onto the common itself, and walk through to wherever your hut was. And the huts went quite a way down. And we were on the first floor.

D: Did anyone get lost in the dark?

A: Pitch dark! No.

D: Or wander into the wrong hut?

A: No. You were always with somebody. And weren't that drunk or anything like that, but they were just merry. I mean there were drunks of course, but by and large, nobody had enough money to actually spend it to get drunk, just a little drink.

D: Did you mix much with the local people?

A: They weren't very keen on the hop pickers. A lot of the London children would like the apples for instance. I wasn't so bad when I was a kid. I used to be in there scrumping. It was the thing to do.

D: Irresistible.

A: Of course, it was. And in the pubs, you were segregated. There was a home dwellers bar. Really thee were too many hop pickers to be able to go in a bar. So mainly you sat outside. Real seats,

like wooden benches with tables out. You had to leave a deposit on your glass. A shilling on a pint glass. But you daren't put your glass down. Once you got your beer and you drank that, then you went back with your glass. If you put it down for a minute, somebody would pinch it and take it back, and they'd get the shilling.

D: But that only applied to the Londoners?

A: Not the home dwellers; they wouldn't have that in there would they?

D: Did that cause a lot of ill feeling?

A: Absolutely none. Nobody cared. Just accepted it.

D: Did the home dwellers pick with you in the hop fields?

A: You might get one in your set - because there were sets - you might get one. And a drift - I think a drift was about 60 bins, and a set was about so many bins. But you didn't get a whole set or anything of home dwellers, they kind of dotted in and out, but it was a bit unusual if we had them because, you knew everybody where you picked; you didn't really know the home dwellers. But they must have been there among you somewhere, they never seemed to be anywhere where we were.

D: Would you always have the same set of people?

A: We tried as much as we possibly could to keep in the same set.

D: So, as kids you must have just thought it was your big family?

A: Yes. All the kids played together, might be a few fights and that. You get somebody along this stretch would take water and a kettle, maybe, or a pot - mainly they used pots with a big handle that you could hang on a hook over the fire. And they would make a fire along there somewhere and make tea for dinner. And you took sandwiches of course. Whatever you had. Could be some eggs or cheese mainly; you got agricultural rations while you were there. Which entitled you to much more cheese.

D: So, it was better?

A: Yes. So, we had plenty of cheese. We used to have that and do an onion and some of the men used to bring a pint of the beer from the pub and take it up the field and they would sit there in the lovely sunshine and a nice bit of bread and cheese and a drop of beer or a cup of tea or whatever it was. We'd sort of break for our lunches about an hour. If you wanted an hour. If you wanted to get back picking you did.

D: Was there anybody used to call the breaks or anything?

A: Yes. Sometimes they'd just blow a bugle. Or they'd call out, "Lunchtime." or "Dinner." "Knock off for dinner." Then at night they'd call out, "Pull no more bines!" And that meant, "That's it, you've had it." So, if you had a watch, we thought; "Four o'clock. They'll be calling out soon." You'd pull about six or eight down. Within your capacity for picking. But you didn't pull a bine down and leave it overnight, because it would go a bit soft. And while they're firm they come off more easily.

D: Would you get penalised for that, for perhaps ruining a bin full of good hops?

A: Nobody ever did. There were overseers, ground walkers[hawkwers?] they were called that would walk round and have a stick and they would lift the bines up. As you worked - there were four bines in a heel - right, you worked, you worked, you worked; then every now and again you went back, and you got those bines together, and you put them round, you tied here, so you left them like that. Come round with a stick, have a look to see if you've left all the tails on - because the heads were the thickest part; the tails were single bits that came out like that. Tails would be slight, there wouldn't be a lot on them - more fiddlier. But the heads would be thick, plenty on it, and you'd get going on them. So, they would lift up and make sure you never left all the tails, or you're supposed to clear your ground up. Obviously, when you pulled the bine down, some fell off. And you would pick them up to a certain extent, but there were a few you'd think, won't do that bit. Something like that. But never a lot because you didn't do that, you weren't allowed to do it. If he saw them, he'd make you go back and do it.

D: Is that where the kids were handy, you'd get them to do the little jobs?

A: Yes. Because kids would run away if they could. The kids never liked it, but then, nobody bothered them that much - sometimes they'd say, "Come and pick for me for a little while and I'll buy you a lolly." Used to get the lolly man came round, the sweet lollies.

D: Not ice lollies?

A: No, the sweet lollies. You did get an ice cream van come round eventually, you get Walls or those come round. In the early days, not a lot of people had the money to sort of splash out all that. I know people that used to go down there and work and get a sub after the first week they could go to the office and get a sub out of what they'd earnt. They would do that to live. And some of the men wouldn't give the wives any money while they were away. We were lucky; I never had to sub. My money always came to me, my husband came down weekends, and the majority did, and you would have your money to live for the week. And also, they paid the rent and did all things like that. Some people went home to bills, rent to be paid. But they didn't care that much, they'd have a holiday, they lived, and finally caught up with what was left. We were lucky to be able to keep the money, and either buy the kids' new clothes at Christmas or toys - not all of it, but a good part. Because it was extra money for us.

D: Didn't it cause any trouble between families, with the husband up in town?

A: No, people didn't do those things in those days. Some did, of course they did. But it wasn't like it was; it wasn't a permissive society in any way.

D: Someone was saying that it was a very hard life and it was good to get away from the home?

A: Where else would you go? Whatever bit of trouble there was, you had to go back and face it and live there. You couldn't up and run. Where would you go? There was nowhere. And the majority had quite a few children. Different way of life.

D: How long did you go hopping for?

A: I went when I moved from Surrey Docks in 1957. Earlier that year and maybe a bit beforehand, the big idea was to knock all the old houses down and replace them with these monstrosities, the flats. Right? Now, my grandparents died, my mother had more children, so we had to move to another address in the same street. And when we all got married, we all still lived there - my mother was bombed out, so she moved to another address - in the same street. My mother lived 69, I eventually lived in my grandparents' house, number 15; and I had a sister who lived in number 9, Eugenia Street; so, we all lived alongside. My brother was married, and he lived in the next turning. His house - rented, they were all rented - the garden backed onto mine. Now we all used to meet regularly. The youngest of my family weren't married, they still lived with my mother. Then another sister got married and she did move over the water; she lived through the tunnel. Only for a short time because a place became available for her there. But as soon as she could she moved back and lived upstairs in my mother's house. And when it came to pulling the houses all down, they pulled that end down first where my mother and sister lived. And there weren't ever so many places to choose from. They ended up going to Pagoda Gardens, Blackheath. Now when my end came, we couldn't get up there - we would have done then at the time. What were we all parted for? We didn't want to be parted ever. And I went to where I live now, which is Lewisham Road; it's at the bottom of Blackheath Hill. The other sister moved - she stayed local because she got a house. So, it made a difference when it came to the hop picking; when we were all together, we could all share the lorries and share things and all that lark. And it was during that time, that wasn't the time when Whitbread's crop failed, but after that - and that Matfield place, Mr Thomsett where we went, I didn't like it, I didn't go back there anymore, but my mother did; she went back there several times. But I went back to Whitbread's. After the following year, everything was alright, and I went back there. I moved in 1957 to where I live now. I went to Whitbread's again for about a year, because my eldest son was at a central school and by then the authorities had clamped down a little bit. You could take them away for about a fortnight, but you couldn't keep them away. You took a holiday earlier in the year when they already had a holiday, you couldn't just keep them away from school. I only went for about one year after that. But after that I went the place at quite near Benenden, in Kent. It was a tiny little farm owned by two sisters, spinster sisters and a brother. And they had this hop farm. And a neighbour, who'd been picking thee for some time said, "Would you like to go there?" And we said we'd go. I lost my husband 1962. So, it was after that. And I hadn't been hop picking because I couldn't afford to give up the job, I had to go to work.

D: What did you work as?

A: I became a home help so that I could keep my eye on my boys, and still carry on thinking I could do the job and do the job indoors the same. But eventually I went to work in an office. Because I used to do that way back. And I worked until I retired. And we went to this farm, where these people ran it and it was the most primitive place I'd ever been. It was just a wooden hut. Nothing there, no hot water or anything, you started from scratch. But. It was fun. And it was nice. And it made a holiday. I only went there one year because - oh the dear old brother was such a nice man, just like somebody you see on the television; a few tufts of white hair and a battered old hat. And he was the one that kept the oast house going - you know they roast the hops. And the two sisters they used to wear those caps and long dresses.

D: The old-fashioned ones?

A: They had another sister that was married, and she was their bookee. But they used to do the measuring, they were lovely. They lived in this farmhouse. The kitchen was as big as this and had a huge open fire there, where they used to cook. It had an oven in the wall, and a big iron bar where they could hang pots. And a stone sink, ordinary stone sink in the corner. And a well. Had a well in their kitchen. In this big kitchen. The well was in there. And they said that that house was built, I think it was for the Huguenots. There was a secret room between some of the rooms. And two very nice ladies. I did go to visit them one year, and my brother took me and we went and we had tea in their huge great range. It was huge; you've never seen anything like it. But the following year the brother died, and they decided not to - it was too much I think, you know, they couldn't possibly have managed to have done everything. I kept in contact with them for several years, just with Christmas cards. But eventually it tailed off from there. I don't know if they were that old, but they seemed old. Whether they died or whether they sold the farm or whether they moved away. The actual house. So that was the end; I didn't go anymore, after that because I had to keep at work.

D: Did the rest of your family still go?

A: I think by then you'd find it had come on to machinery. You could go down there to -when the hops were stripped, the bines were stripped by the machine, first of all a tractor went out and cut all the bines down, brought it back to the farm, and the machine stripped everything off. It came along a conveyor belt and you would pick the leaves out as quickly as you could and that and that was it. Well that wasn't hop picking. Some did it because you lived in the same circumstances; you lived in a hut, and you cooked above a fire, and it was a companionable time. But it wasn't hop picking as we knew it, was it?

D: You weren't outdoors?

A: No. It wasn't the same. Then after the flood, really it tailed off all together, the actual hop picking. But came with the machine.

D: Do you think people resented the machines coming?

A: Very much so. All mechanised things have been resented through the ages. Go back to the looms and everything.

D: Was there much protest about it?

A: I don't think there were protests; there may have been a few odd ones. But it was accepted. I think that flood put the [card bush?] on it all. I don't think anybody cared so much after that. A complete way of life that is finished. And I would love it to come back. And Michael would. He says now, "I wish I could buy a hop field and put some huts in it."

D: Would you still go?

A: I would. And Michael would. He says, "I think people would pay me to come and do it." I said, "I'm sure they would. A lot of them would." All regret that passing.

D: How long did he keep hopping for?

A: He kept as long as he could. But then as a young boy he used to have to go to work. He couldn't get a holiday; he was there.

D: I get the impression from people it's something they will never forget?

A: That's right. Never forget. It a was carefree, happy way of life. A different way of life for us. You found really, only the poor people went.

D: What was it that made it so good?

A: I think the companionship, the utter difference in the way of life - being out in the open; fresh air. A happy family way of life. Everybody shared - well they did anyway in those days.

D: The fresh air, was that the big thing that made it?

A: No, I would say the first and foremost would be the money. You didn't have to leave the children and go out to work in a factory or anything like that. You could take them with you; you lived rent free, these huts. The wood was free. So, you could live there. I think a lot of them are very glad to earn those extra shillings. And then the bonus was that it was a kind of a holiday in the fresh air, and the countryside and a different way of life.

D: Did you go home with some hops?

A: Yes. And a chicken. Used to go round and pick one out. By the Bell there was an orchard, and you always went with apples, hopping apples, cookers. They were real hopping apples; they were called hopping apples. And usually you went to this place. We used to go next to the Bell. Other people used to go wherever things were available. They would have so many killed.

D: Was that a present or a gift?

A: Well no, you bought it. You bought your apples. You'd give your neighbours, when you got home, you'd give your neighbours hopping apples. And you'd have a nice meal of chicken, roast chicken really in those days was a real luxury. Wasn't the cheapest meat you could buy. Not then. Not like it is today. Now it isn't a treat like it was then. Now it's like we used to buy sausages, because you didn't have much money left so you bought sausages for tea. It was a cheap meal. Not now; sausages are as dear as meat. But chicken isn't. Whitbread's as an employer was very good, they supplied lots of things other farms didn't. You'll read mostly about all the good things in that book.

D: Did they have the shire horses down there when you were down there?

A: Yes. They were working horses. They used to pull the poke carts. That's my mum, me, [Matthew?]. The horses used to pull the poke carts. And another thing they used to do was to send these up to the station to meet the hop picking trains. And you could put your luggage on there and get a lift as well, take you down to the farm, when you arrived.

D: Did everyone turn up on these trains?

A: They were special hop picking trains that were cheap rate. Most people used to go by train at first. But then you could go by lorry. So, when you went by train, you packed everything up like that. People made boxes and packed everything in that; boxes on wheels, Or prams. If you could get a pram. Or boxes on wheels. Sometimes you'd walk from the station. See that's 1943 _ that's relatively recent.

D: So, there must have been an enormous procession of people?

A: There was. An invasion, really.

D: But the local people must have done well out of it, surely, because they'd have all that great line of people coming down spending money in the local pub and shops and stuff?

A: Yes. There y'are, see? That was some huts, with the tin roofs; they were more down the end of the common. Near where the Medway was. And that's how you did it. There were shelves in there, obviously that's where they nailed the wood too. You made them into shelves; you screwed the hooks in and put your cups and your saucers up there. If somebody went by and gave it a bang they fell off! You all shared; all got in bed together.

D: Head to tail?

A: No. All up the same way. And you'd fight over the clothes because whoever was at that end of the bed would turn over and all the clothes would come off. [Lily Hoe?], that was a field where we used to go to pick. Here's a cook house. I've got a picture of my daughter; she was about 11

months old. And she's asleep. And it was the day we were going home. And there were a pile of faggots there, like that; there's the faggots, and I've put a coat over it and she's gone to sleep, and I laid her on that. I've got a picture of that.

D: Was it very smoky?

A: No. They had chimneys, and you make sure, because you had to learn to get a good fire. That's the cookhouse. It probably was evening - not night. There's the Salvation Army.

D: They look like little hop bins, that you put the children in?

A: Like little hammocks really. You'll find this very interesting, now you know something about it.

D: Now you can get hop pillows for people who don't sleep very well; didn't working among the hops all day long make people drowsy?

A: Well, we used to put it down more to being out in the open air all day. That you were tired. You didn't get drowsy out in the field. There was too much going on. This is my Steven, and that's my dad. That was a really, really good year, the hops and the fields. And it was a good picking year. The weather, everything it was one of those years.

A: They were catholic sisters, like if you were catholic you went there.

D: Did they come down just for the hop season?

A: Yes. Most of them went for the hop season.

D: And they'd pick alongside of you?

A: Yes, they would. They'd come round and talk to you and they'd pick.

D: And hold services as well?

A: Yes. But you weren't obliged to go at all. Most of the Catholics used to like to go for mass.

D: So, you were minded for, spiritually?

A: Yes. My Steven's about 6 there.

D: Did people bring their pets?

A: Yes. Everybody would bring the bones for the dog, or take the cat if the cat stayed down.

D: Did it wander?

A: No.

D: Must have been wonderful hunting for it?

A: Yes.

D: They must have been really lively the fields?

A: Of course. You'd get somebody start a song and everybody would be singing. It was lovely.

D: What sort of things did you sing?

A: All the songs of the day. "They try to tell us we're too young." Sometimes they'd sing the old songs. Not "Daisy, Daisy." But of that era. That was taken that day. She was 93 when she died. 1988. She died soon after that.

D: This photo must have been taken just before that?

A: This was that day; we'd gone down there for that day. 1987. There were some people there from Australia that day. They were absolutely fascinated. It was the machines that spoiled it all. That's progress isn't it? Or is it? Who knows?

D: Did you have any particular hop songs?

A: The most popular one was,

"When you go down hopping
Hopping down in Kent
See your Mother Riley
Sitting in a tent.
With a te_i_o, and a te_i_o, A te_i, e_i_o.

Some say hopping's lousy You don't believe it's true We only go down
hopping
To earn a bob or two.

and it goes on like that. When we were going onto the field, onto Whitbreads field, after we'd come out of the Bell, and a chap open the gate, and somebody shouted out, "Sing! Sing!" You

didn't know what to sing. So, ooh, "When you go down hopping..." You'd sing that as you go onto the field. But that was the hopping song.

D: That was the anthem of the hoppers?

A: Yes.

D: When did the change start to happen?

A: Well, I think they started to employ the machines very slowly, while the pickers were still there. Some had been brought in. Maybe they might finish the hop picking after three weeks and then let the machines do the rest. Which wouldn't be very much left. There were those sorts of things, at first. I don't think they really took over until that flood.

D: '68?

A: Yes.

D: Did people stop going altogether then?

A: Yes, they didn't have pickers. They stopped. And I didn't bother to go after that. I think a lot of the other firms were beginning to change. I think there was a hop marketing board had been set up. I think they bought one machine and you could borrow it - the smaller farmers didn't want to buy machines. They could hire for a time. I think this is how it all started. When there's a so-called improvement, you think you've got to do it as well. One started doing it and the others felt they had to do the same. Competition. I think a lot of the smaller ones still did keep their pickers. In fact, I think it may be as long as ten years ago, Michael took me to a place where the farmer had died, but he'd left it in his will that that hop field - I don't think there were any hops - he put the huts, they were in an orchard, and the people that had used them all those years could go there and have a holiday. It wasn't a very big place. It was in the middle of an orchard.

D: Did people use the hops for cures or anything?

A: Not really. I didn't know of anybody.

D: Did the gypsies used to come down and pick?

A: The gypsies used to keep themselves to themselves. Actually, I don't think we ever had any on Whitbread's. You got them on smaller farms, they'd have their own caravans.