Daphne and David Wallace: Hop Picking.

[plus, Pam and Kit and Bill Slack].

P: I'm in Colyer Street, Marden, talking to Daphne Wallace. Tel: Colyer Street 491.

P: You were a local?

D: Yes. When I say Londoners always got blamed for things that went on in the country, stealing apples or chickens, and things like that, it was often Londoners. But then often with Londoners they were a bit stupid concerning chicken and things like that.

P: In what way?

D: Being able to kill chicken and things like that.

P: How did they go about it then?

D: I don't know. It wasn't the Londoners; it was just local people stealing and they blamed it on the Londoners. It happened quite a lot - did you find that Bill?

B: I used to love the Londoners, I made a fortune on their glass and everything. All the public houses in this area used to be one room for the locals. Every other room they put barrels in the window, kegs of beer, and where they served all the Londoners. I was 10 years of age. A pint of beer then was 4d and they used to charge a shilling it was on the glasses, which cost them about 2d. So, when they went home, naturally all the boys were out collecting all the glasses and get the shillings.

D: They used to do beer bottles as well. And lemonade bottles. Did you get money back on the beer bottles?

B: They used to buy the glass you see and every time they want a refill they used to keep their glass - because there was no way you could cope as it were, serving out of windows everywhere to keep them going, there was a queue at these hatches for beer all night long.

P: And where did the bottles come into it then?

B: Well they used to run out of glasses or didn't want to pay a deposit or anything, they used to buy a jug or a bottle.

D: Or when they went to re-order, instead of getting a pint of brown ale, they used to get a bottle of brown and then pour it into their glasses.

P: You could claim back on the bottles as well?

D: You could claim back on the bottles.

P: So, the country folk became quite wealthy during that time?

B: Yes. You'll find that every publican in this area, five weeks of hopping, no need to open the rest of the year, he's made enough.

P: So, as a little boy you'd run around with these glasses they'd pay you a shilling on returning them?

B: Yes. Wonderful.

P: Amazing. That was a lot of money. Probably you made more than the hop pickers I should think.

B: The glasses only cost 2d, if he bought them. So why the people didn't buy them and bring them with them, I don't know.

P: Somebody said that if they had a glass, they had to hold onto it, because if they let it out of their hand somebody else would swipe it and claim the shilling.

B: Oh yes.

D: A lot of publicans used to put their own stamp at the bottom, didn't they Bill? So, they knew that you weren't fiddling when you took that glass back somewhere else.

B: Oh yes, you had to take it to the same pub, they marked it, to pay the deposit, from another pub.

D: And there used to be a lot of pubs round here then. From Yalding right up to Horsemenden, the road was really packed full with either people walking to the pub or walking home. The roads used to be really crowded, as soon as the pubs opened, six or so it used to be, until about half past ten.

Alex: Someone I was talking to this morning said that when he went, there wasn't any lemonade or anything, there wasn't anything for the children to drink. Is that true? What would the children drink?

B: Bottles of lemonade. They had still lemonade in bottle.

D: I don't think they had so much squash or things like that, did you?

B: Not squash.

K: They'd make up lemonade powder.

P: So, as a child you'd be going to the local school?

B: Yes.

P: Did the school start later in the year for the local kids because of the hopping period?

B: It's the same now, the holidays were more or less timed with when the hops are grown.

D: We never used to break up until the end of August then.

B: No, end of August.

P: And then you'd do the hopping in the school holidays?

D: Yes.

P: You didn't miss any school?

D: No.

P: Did you go onto the hop fields yourself?

B: Yes, kids like us were sent up the front of the row and used to pick them in the upturned umbrella.

P: What's your memory of being a child and meeting London kids coming down?

B: Funny enough we didn't meet a lot of the kids.

P: They were kept separate, were they?

D: The kids had to work during the day.

B: The kids had to work during the day. That's all they came down there for, to get their clothes for the next school term.

P: But a lot of them seem to have been knocking around in the afternoons and not working, so I wondered?

B: I don't know, the locals never seemed to meet them.

P: So, did you look forward to the hoppers coming down?

B: It was just one of the year's routines. It was one of the seasons you went through. And at that time also there was large bushes of blackberries, and all of the local kids went picking those. Just down the road here at New Farm, there must have been forty or fifty acres of blackberries there.

P: Blackberry picking for the jam firms?

B: Yes. For Smedleys which is near Maidstone. So, there was a lot of the, it wasn't just hop-picking. And then you got the main crop of apples at the same time. My mother very seldom went hop picking; she always went apple picking, blackberries, plums, hardly see plums now, there were acres and acres of plums in those days. Even cob nuts.

D: Yes, that used to be a good job didn't it.

P: What would you pick the cob nuts for?

B: Yourself. Most of them fell on the ground.

P: And what were they used in?

D: They were edible.

B: Edible nuts.

D: You know, the cob nuts you buy at Christmas. Kentish cobs they were.

B: So really and truly, I didn't do a lot of hopping.

D: I couldn't go in a hop field, I used to get ill. Because of the smell of the hops, they used to put - was it sulphur?

B: They used to dry them in sulphur.

D: The smell of the hops used to make me ill. I was always sick and tummy upsets and headaches.

P: So, you didn't have any contact as a child with hopping?

D: Not a lot of contact. I had to have some because my mother used to pick hops, and my father used to be the measurer. And I remember quite an early age, I don't know how old I was, we used to get up early and he used to go round the huts or the common they used to call it and knock people up in the mornings, because in those days you had to be out in the hop field at seven o'clock.

P: How did he wake them up?

D: He just used to bang on the door.

P: Was he doing that because he was employed as a farm labourer anyway? What was his actual job?

D: Well he was more or less in charge of the hop fields. They have to get so many pokes of hops each day to put in the kilns to dry them. And often if you weren't out there very early in the morning, then to get the number of hops they required you had to be out there until about six o'clock at night.

P: So, he had his own quota that he had to get out of the hop pickers?

D: Oh yes. He didn't do anything to the drying and that of the hops, but he had to make sure they got enough hops to dry, depends how many kilns they had.

P: So, do you remember him coming home with tales of what had been happening in the fields?

D: No, I don't think so because during the day everyone was too busy, you didn't hear much what went on. Weekends it used to get crowded everywhere, you used to hear some funny things of what happened at the local pubs and things like that. You'd hear them singing until late at night. Living here there's the pub just up the road, not that I lived here long. Soon after we came here, they had a hop picking machine. So, they used to employ a family, that I said were a nice family, they used to employ the younger daughters and that on the hop picking machine when they first had it.

P: What were the songs you remember people singing?

D: A long way to Tipperary, Pack up your troubles; Nell Dean. Any old song.

B: Hopping down in Kent, was a good one wasn't it?

P: Do you remember them being pretty drunk then?

D: Oh yes.

B: It was only the women and children. A lot of the men had jobs in London and came down on the Friday night, until Sunday night, that's where the crowd in the pubs. They weren't there in the week.

P: Do you remember any of the men coming down on their own to the pubs on the weekdays?

D: Not a lot, one or two, but not a lot.

B: One or two husbands stayed there. The trains were crowded every Friday night.

D: And they used to hire a lorry. If somebody had a lorry they always used to be sitting on the floor, standing up in the lorry, and lorry loads used to come down for the weekend, the husbands and sons. If there was a family down here there used to be the grandad, he would probably come down, and sons and sons-in-law from different families, they would all come down in lorries. Not many people had cars. When I was a child I'm talking about now.

P: Do you remember as a girl meeting any nice young men from London?

D: No, during the time I don't think I was really old enough. The hop picking photo there I must have been about 12. I can't remember any hop picking boys that I had.

P: What about you Bill?

B: I joined the navy when I was 16 so I left a lot of it behind.

P: On the whole it sounds there wasn't a huge amount of contact, only through work.

D: Yes.

P: So, what time would he finish work?

D: Until they'd measured all the hops, could be six or seven. It used to be very long hours, late hours. I can first remember picking hops and they went on strike, they had to pick seven bushels for a shilling. And then they had it reduced down to six bushels a shilling. That was about the 1930's. I wasn't very old.

K: Time in the latter years when we got 6d a bushel wasn't it.

B: You had the set system in the hop fields. All the locals had their sets, the Londoners had their sets. For some reason you wasn't integrated at all.

P: Did they pay the home dwellers more than the Londoners?

B: No.

D: I know it used to very difficult the pubs they used to have their own rooms, but my father used to like to drink at weekends, Sunday lunchtime, Sunday nights, Saturday nights. And as he went down to the pub, there would be several Londoners wanting to buy him a drink, but he never accepted a drink from them, not while he was working with them, because somebody would say, "Oh yes, I bought you a pint at the weekend, count them a bit light for me." and that sort of thing.

P: Lighter in weight, meaning?

D: You have a rim round, there's a knack of it, just flick in the basket, so it looks fuller than it is. But he never used to get involved socially with the Londoners. He used to before they went back. When the hops were finished, if they finished picking today, they would be paid the next day. Well, the next day, he'd meet them in the pub, and he'd have a drink and be sociable with everyone, and us children they used to have horse and carts, or wagons they used to have, and take a lot of hop pickers to the station. So, we used to meet them, we used to live near a pub, we live at Staplehurst, we used to go and see them off on the train and that. It was quite exciting times when they left.

P: Where did your father actually live?

D: Staplehurst.

P: So, he was working for the farmer and this was part of his work?

D: Yes.

P: The whole farm was?

D: Hops and fruit. Most farms used to be hop and fruit years ago.

P: Was he involved in how many they picked and the ticking of their cards?

D: Yes, he measured them you see, and at the end of the measure there'd be somebody with him, saying how many; somebody might have had six bushels, somebody might have had twelve bushels and that was put down in a card. They used to call it the tally man.

P: If people lost their cards, did he or his helper keep a separate record?

D: Oh yes, they always kept their own book. You all had a card and he had quite a large book with all these because big places there used to be a hundred bins or more.

P: So, they do it by the family?

D: Yes. They get somebody to do that job.

P: Did he ever have the task of paying out the subs?

D: No. They used to have a little hut place. It used to be the farm manager, and they used to pay out. You used to get Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, or something like that.

P: Did you as a young person ever go up to the hop huts and go and look at how the people were living?

D: Yes, because I used to sometimes go up if there had been a wet day. They never used to really pick when it was raining hard. But if in the morning it was too wet to pick, and about ten o'clock it had left off, and then my father used to have to go round and have a shout, "Get out in the hop fields." Well then, I used to go with him. Some used to decorate the huts. What I'm talking about now, the huts weren't decorated like they have been over previous years, before the hop pickers came down, the farmer used to go to all the huts, and they used to spray lime, wash them out with lime, and they used to leave so many faggots - that's a bundle of wood - for their beds. They'd put say eight faggots in and a couple of bails of straw. And that was their beds.

P: As a kid do you remember thinking, that looks fun?

D: Well probably it was, rather them than me, because hops used to upset me, and the hop smell went into everything, you couldn't get away from it. On peoples' clothes and you had a job to get your hands clean. I don't think you did get your hands clean in those days, they stayed dirty. Terrible gunge and stuff, there's a powder in the hops.

P: Did your mother get involved in any way?

D: Oh yes. She used to pick hops. And my cousin, she used to pick hops.

P: Did they go to a separate place to do it or did they pick on the farm there?

D: Oh, they picked on the farm where my father was. There's a photo there of my mother and father in the hop field. My parents lived in a tied cottage on the farm where there was hops. And my eldest daughter was born in July. I was living at home, it was during the war, and Kit was evacuated down here, and she worked on the same farm as my mother.

P: How old were you then, Kit?

K: 27, 26.

D: And they used to employ extra people to train the hops. I think you did more or less anything on the farm?

K: We did. Fruit picking, everything.

D: Kit worked on the farm, and I used to go out for a walk, and see the hop training and that. Kit was very good, as it was wartime, coupons were scarce, so any baby clothes Kit wasn't using Kit passed them on to me. And we just got friendly, and that was that. And Kit was my daughter's godmother and we stayed friends for 47 years now. There were times when I had a family of children and did have a son in hospital that we didn't meet, but we've always corresponded. But now with the family all grown up my daughter will always take me up to London to stay with Kit or else bring Kit down here.

P: I wonder how common it is for people to have maintained friendships which were made during the hopping season?

K: There might have been some. Because some local boys married London girls. Flo, she married a Londoner. And there was Adams at Rock Farm, Tom Adams, he married a London girl.

P: Did the Londoners settle alright down here?

D: Yes, I think they did. Flo did, she married into quite a large family.

P: Do you remember ever going up to London as a youngster?

D: No. You could never afford to go up there. The first time I went up to London was when I had children, took them up to see Buckingham Palace. I can't ever remember going up before that. The first time I remember we went to see an ice show. And I think my youngest son was 4 or 5. He's 35 now. Now people think nothing of just going up for the day's shopping.

P: It's the same the other way round, it was a major expedition for Londoners to come to the country.

D: Yes, it was. Well it was a holiday for some people. Some people needed to work. Because they used to borrow money to come down to get their fare to come down even. They had to borrow money and that had to be paid back. I don't think they had money lenders in Kent. But the Londoners used to buy perhaps a pair of wellingtons for the children to come down and they had to pay that back when they went back.

P: Do you remember thinking when you looked at the children, that they looked poor?

D: No, it didn't occur to me. We never had a lot. Farm labourer's wage used to be about 2 a week. We used to eat rabbit, and my father would find some potatoes and help himself.

K: It wasn't only the Londoners!

D: No! And swedes and that type of thing. We used to have a rabbit stew with swedes and potatoes when times were bad.

P: What did you mean when you said that the Londoners didn't know how to kill a chicken, they were stupid?

D: They wouldn't have stolen it you see. Somebody would miss about half a dozen chicken, and it'd be, "Them Londoners were round last night." And you knew it wasn't really. My father always used to say, it wasn't the Londoners because they wouldn't know how to kill it. Some of them, if there were cows in the fields, they walked miles to avoid cows and things like that. I don't think they called them cows, they was always bulls, and they were frightened of bulls. I suppose you can remember going round the long way to avoid them?

K: Would I go in there if there were any cows or anything? And if there was a ram in the field, you'd say, "I'm not going that way."

D: The exciting bit - I found it exciting - was when you went into the shop, they had a wire netting all-round the front of the shop. Went round the back, the local people always went round the back. But it used to be exciting to see the netting go up knowing the hop picking would soon start.

P: Was that because they didn't trust the Londoners?

D: I suppose so.

K: They thought the Londoners would pinch. The local people are round the back doing the same thing. there was more things stolen during hop picking than there was all the year round because the local people knew they could get away with it. It was difficult for them to do anything, so they used to make a point of doing it.

P: Were you here during the war years?

D: About three years before that I wasn't here. It was the latter part of the war years I was.

P; How did the war affect the hop picking fields?

D: I think the hop pickers thought it would be nice to get to Kent away from all the bombing in London, but when they came down here, they realised there was still a lot of bombing down here and they missed their shelters. Because they didn't have shelters, they used to dig a ditch a very deep ditch, when you were going down the hop fields and you went in this deep ditch. A lot of them missed their shelters, so they went back home.

P: Did they have a problem during the war of getting enough pickers?

D: I don't think so no, because they were quite excited about getting out of London. Because they felt that London, they were getting bombed. If they went into the country they wouldn't get bombed so much. But that wasn't the case, because we used to get stray bombs. And doodlebugs. And the German planes seeing people in the hop fields would machine gun them.

P: What about the land army?

D: The land army was around here quite a lot. I don't think they had a lot to do with the hop picking. Mainly they did the wheat, the harvest.

K: Or the fruit picking. Or if the farmer also had stock, they were looking after the stock, milking the cows, feeding the chickens. because farms used to have something of everything years ago. they weren't just a fruit farm, or hops.

P: Was it complicated with the rationing when Londoners came down here during the war, in the shops?

K: They got extra as well. Extra food during the hopping. The hoppers were classed as agricultural workers

D: Whereas perhaps we got a ration of 4oz of cheese, you used to get about half a pound or a pound. The funny part about it was that none of my family used to eat cheese during the war.

P: So, when they were hop picking did, they have their rations increased as well?

D: The local people always got extra cheese, because they often used to have to take pack lunches. It wasn't a sandwich like we have now. It was a chunk of bread, a chunk of cheese, and a pickled onion or something like that. More like a ploughman's lunch. They had to take that to work with them because they were big farms and to walk home to lunch and back, by the time they got home it'd be time to go back, so they used to take their lunch in the field. And the drink they used to take was a bottle of cold tea. With the sugar and the milk in it. Must have been terrible, a cup of cold tea. But it was thirst quenching.

P: Did they take beer?

D: No, they didn't. When the hop picking was the end of the day, the men that were associated with it the people that worked in the oast, and my father and perhaps the tally man they always used to have a glass of cider as soon as they left off work.

P: At the end of the season was there any celebration with the pickers?

D: No. There was nothing like that. I suppose it was a bit unkind really; you got paid off and you was gone, cheerio, you was gone and there was no hanging about.

K: It was only Whitbread's did that, at the end of the season.

D: But when I'm talking about it that's more the war years. And before the war there was never anything. And then men used to go and clear out the huts and have bonfires of the straw and the faggots that they used.

P: Did it seem quite dull after they'd gone?

D: Oh, there's David.

K: There's the young man you need.

D: This is my youngest son.

Dv: We don't produce many hops at all for beer.

P: Where does it come from?

Dv: Germany, Austria, America.

A: So, breweries use just as many hops, but they import them?

Dv: Yes.

A: Whitbread's, the peak was about 1870, huge hectares of hops, it's reduced from about 25,000 to about 8,000.

Dv: Basically, because the cost of producing the hops is too high. A lot of it will still be used today, a lot for bitter, but not to the extent that it was used years ago. Because there isn't the amount of beer being drunk that there was years ago. Now you go out, it's all wine. Before it was all beer.

P: So, the farms aren't really in the hop trade now?

Dv: No, none of the farms. You don't sell any hops at all; they're all done through a marketing board. Always have been.

A: The hop market used to be in Southwark Street? The Hop Exchange. But that was years ago.

Dv: They use them for dyes, green. The better you can dry, the better the colour. You won't get the farm growing hops until the winter which is when you plant your hops. The hops grow from the root up to as high as 16 feet. It is quite brittle. It would snap, it would bend but you'd break off the support system going up to it. This is why when we was hop picking you always had to be careful that they didn't go too far in front, because they just cut them down now and they'd be all withered. You can cut them off and transport them up without too much problem. But they would go off by the time I cut them here and got them to you, they were going off in that short a time. Then you'd just hang them and leave them. They would stay green for a long time, but they would start fading and not looking. They would still smell like hops and still look like hops. the hops and the leaves

would all go brown together. They take a lot of root up. If you can dig up a root next year, you can probably get them going and all strung up. How long have yours taken?

D: I had lovely hops last year but this year I haven't got one.

Dv: You could do it for this year and get going. But it's no point digging it up because it will just go off quick. You can get a dozen hop bines, and if you hang them up, they will look half green. They will have string already on them.

A: To make it look real we get three lengths and put some wire through on the bottom and then string them in different directions.

D: When all the hops are grown you can't see through them. Years ago, they were always grown up poles, wooden poles. Go to the Kent Rural Life Museum at Aylesford where they still grow them up poles. They pick once a year and people can go and pick. I can get you the baskets. Some straw. A big bale.

Side Two:

Dv: What you would be better off doing is actually filling one of them up with straw to make it look like hopping. I've got the bines. You'll have to make the bin. I've got about a dozen.

K: The farm that I went to use to have about a dozen faggots at the bottom, and you'd pack straw on top of that, and make the bed. And use them for the fire.

Dv: You don't get the big hops like you used to.

P: 100 hop heads on a bine?

K: That's called branches.

Dv: If you've got 25 bines, then you could take one down, and keep your hops as hops; they won't go off.

D: A certain amount drop off when they're handled.

P: So, 25 or more.

Dv: You've got to get them all at once, you've got no choice, because you're starting when they're finishing.

P: So, 30, and we'll string them up. Can we have 10 for the last week in August and then 30 after that?

Dv: So, 40 in total.

P: Yes.

A: Can you grow them in tubs?

Dv: Provided they're big enough. They like lime soil to grow in.

P: Could you get us a measurer's bushel basket?

K: They'll probably have some at Paddock Wood.

Dv: My work number is 0622 831 685. Home, 0580 892 754? [794?].

P: Do you know anyone we could approach for sponsorship?

Dv: You could try the hop marketing board. In Paddock Wood.

P: This is a large photo of a woman with three children.

D: That's Kit, Kit's daughter, Kit's son, and that's my daughter. Kit come and stayed with us when we were at Paddock Wood. That was taken at Paddock Wood. Taken 42 years ago.

K: My daughter Francis. My son Daniel. My god daughter Susan. And that's me. At Halls Farm.

P: And this photo?

K: That's my daughter same year I should think, sitting up there on the bin.

P: That one?

D: That's my parents, that's my father, my mother, my cousin, and that's me. About '58.

P: Who's this?

D: That's Kit's daughter Francis. They're having their lunch you can just see Kit there. That's Kit, that's Francis, that's Danny, that's my daughter Susan, and my mother there. That would have been one Saturday morning. That was a break when we used to have lunch. They used to call all to dinner. "All to dinner!"

K: When you started it was, "All on!" or "Back to work!"

P: What were they eating there?

D: Sandwiches I suppose, spam or cheese. Might be squash in there. Or lemonade. You sit on the bine, there's a bunch of bines behind there. What year is that Kit?

K: About 40 years ago.1951.