

Dave Hook: Hop Picking

D: What's your association with the hopping?

H: I was a railway guard at a place called Stewarts Lane, and we used to get a lot of spare jobs, and hopping was always considered a spare job, because it wasn't a set routine.

D: Was that the job of being guard on the train?

H: Yes. So, all the hopping stock that they used for the hopping train was very ancient and it was kept at South Bermondsey, which is Brick Layers Arms, and there it was just not touched from year to year, it was only really used for hopping.

D: Why was that?

H: It was so ancient. And kept in special sheds down there. Those days a guard had to look at his train, inspect it before there was even an engine attached, and most of the bogeys were built in 1800 and something. The actual rolling stock on top, the carriages, they were later. Some of it as I say was pretty ancient. It was our job to get it out from there and used to bring it up the Smoke and then reversed your engine round and you went into London Bridge which was termed Low Level - it's a terminal part - in those days it was just called London Bridge Low Level, and you went in platform 8 and 9 and there you had all your hoppers waiting.

D: What did they all look like?

H: This is it. Most of them, they come up from places like Stratford, West Ham and that. Some of them had pushed prams all the way up from Canning Town and right the way over, over the bridge, and we used to have extra vans put on the back, just to take all their...

D: Was it an ordinary carriage?

H: Ordinary carriages, but on the back, you'd have three what we called PMV vans, which you just filled up with all their - I mean, the train was only going to places like Paddock Wood and terminated there. You had plenty of time, then everybody came to get all their belongings. A lot of them'd just have the old galvanised baths, they used for the wash on the Friday night, and that was filled up with all their stuff. And one held one handle and the other the other one.

D: So, they put all the big stuff in these trucks in the van?

H: That's right.

D: And then they'd all pile in.

H: That's it, then they'd just go down. like a day out at the seaside, all in these compartments, then we all unloaded it when we got to Paddock Wood. Yalding was another place we used to go. I can remember going down once on the Hastings line, which the tunnels there are probably altered now, but in those days they'd only take certain stock because the tunnels hadn't been built to take all the - the size of the tunnel, you had to have special stock to get through. Nobody thought to check them on these, and they were so old they had chimney pots on top, they were to let the air in. But when it came along to the tunnel it knocked all of these things flat. And that was the hoppers train.

D: Was it deliberate policy to have old battered up stock for the hoppers, was that because it was an extra train, or because the hoppers were scruffy?

H: Partly both I suppose. It was only used on those occasions. Maybe they didn't look after it all that well, but there was never any damage done on the few that I took. I can remember going vividly to Paddock Wood, that was the main sort of hopping area. And the trains there. Very often they'd be picked up there, and one or two you'd see just trudging off. It wasn't unusual because I used to work in the Surrey Docks a bit later on and there again, hopping was on its way out, but there were still people going down but from there they used to have the lorries, picking them up and you used to get the whole family on them, they had the piano on the back as well, all ready to get a tune out of the piano.

D: People have told me a lot of stories of trying to fiddle the fare on the hopping train, were you aware of much of this going on?

H: No.

D: Did you ever catch anybody?

H: No, never. They put on ticket inspectors at the station, so they'd probably be pretty alert. London Bridge was easy to get on, because you had not only the barrier, but you could come across the footpath, the footway thing over the top, from other platforms and get down to where the hopping trains went from. The trains, one or two were corridors, but the majority weren't even corridor trains. So again, you couldn't get any ticket inspection on the trains, but they could at the terminal station. I don't think they tried all that hard anyhow to stop them.

D: Was it a special fare for the hoppers?

H: It was cheaper. In those days you had very few concessions that you've got nowadays. You had a workmen's ticket early in the morning. This was going up to London and that, and if you left before 7 o'clock, you got what was termed a workman's ticket, and it was very cheap, and they did away with that. But other than that, you didn't get the concessions as you have nowadays. But it was a slightly cheaper for them. Most of them went and got it a couple of days beforehand, you'd see them queueing at London Bridge and places.

D: So, this was like a pass, they'd have to get that to get on the train?

H: It was an ordinary ticket, there wasn't anything special about it, no. The only ones I can remember seeing were a sort of yellowy colour, whereas in those days, everything was green on the Southern Region, because it was originally the Southern Railway, which the colours for the Southern Railway were green, so everything was green, all your trains were green, all your tickets were green, everything was green. It was a shame when it went really.

D: When were you working?

H: This was the early '50's, this would be '51, '52.

D: You weren't there before the war, were you?

H: No.

D: How long did the journey take to get down to Paddock Wood?

H: About an hour and a quarter I would say. They're far faster than that today, because you're electrified right the way down. In those days you weren't electrified. The trains at that time was only electrified as far as Sevenoaks, so everything after that had to be steam. Everything was steam trains. Even the old Hastings line which later had specially built little diesel ones to get through these narrow tunnels, at that time. Didn't even have that. Everything was steam.

D: And these hopper specials, did they stop off anywhere else?

H: Just to the station that you were going. Occasionally they would put one in to pick up - I can remember taking one that went via Lewisham and pick up people at Lewisham. But that was unusual. Most of them, the people had to get to - I only ever worked out of London Bridge. And most of those were fast from London Bridge. I even remember one going right the way down - which is unusual - to Robertsbridge. Quite a long way down. Not a hopping area, well it is a hopping area, but it wasn't for Londoners, it was mostly people from Hastings and that went out to do the hopping. But for some reason I can remember, they took a lot of hoppers down there. But that was unusual.

D: Some people, those who lived in Deptford, can remember going from New Cross Gate?

H: Yes. That would be the London Bridge one. New Cross Gate was the next station down you see, going that way or New Cross. Yes, they would stop there.

D: How crowded were these hopping trains?

H: Some were very crowded indeed. Other ones weren't. It just depended on the day really. Couldn't say certain areas got a lot more than others.

D: When did you run them?

H: They mostly started pretty early in the morning, about 7 o'clock in the morning. About September.

D: Once they've all got down there at the start of the season, would you carry on running the trains?

H: Oh no. These stations all had ordinary passenger services as well, like Paddock Wood and that, so you got other relations went down to them, and they just used the ordinary service.

D: So, the men coming at the weekends?

H: Oh no, they didn't get anything special, they just used the ordinary trains. And then we would put them on at a certain date to bring them back.

D: Was that prearranged with the farmers? Would the farmers let you know when there was likely to be hordes of hoppers coming back?

H: Probably, I don't really know for sure, but they probably would. There wouldn't be that much variation each year, just a week or so depending on when it was finished. I don't think they could have done, I think they must have been set dates, because we had it all printed out and handed out to us weeks before the actual hopping, so they must have been set the dates prior.

D: So, if any of them missed the date they just had to find their own way back?

H: Yes, probably. A lot of them didn't come back with us anyhow, they made their own way back. Their final payoff usually went straight in the pubs and that, the pubs did a roaring trade, all in the area.

D: Did you ever go down to the hop fields yourself?

H: Only on the one occasion. Yes, I went down for some reason or other I did. Yalding, that was where I went to, just outside Yalding.

D: What was your impression of the people that went down there, did you get to know any of them?

H: Yes. They were just natural people. Just got on well with them. In later life I worked in Bermondsey in the Docks, Surrey Docks, and that was just a continuation. That all sort of worked with people from South London. Just came natural to consider myself one.

D: How many years did you work on hoppers' trains?

H: Only three seasons.

D: Were there any people that you recognised from season to season?

H: Not really. I can remember individuals and that pushing prams, but never got to know them or anything.

D: Were they large family groups?

H: Yes.

D: What was the largest you saw?

H: Nothing extremely large. I should say only about seven or eight.

D: People have talked about piling up their belongings in a pram, did you help get these things on?

H: Yes, and off.

D: Was it very difficult sometimes?

H: It was actually. People late for the train, running, and things dropping off.

D: People took all sorts down with them?

H: It was amazing, yes, what actually went down. You expected bedding and that; I'm not quite sure what was actually in their little hut places they, I think they had to bring their own bedding and that.

D: What else did people bring, what did you see in these piles?

H: I can remember clocks dropping, quite large clocks, not the little alarms and everything. Not exactly grandfather. Quite big things as they went down. I suppose they needed alarms to get them up in the morning, they started pretty early. I think my main memory, funny enough not the trains, is the lorries. Years later when I was in the Surrey docks, they were all on the backs, and they were already to go as they went down the road.

D: Who organised the lorries?

H: Just the families. A lot of local firms would lend them, or a few cases they had their own. Because not many people had cars in those days.

D: Did any of the lorry drivers only do it as a moonlight job?

H: I don't think so, they were nearly all family. I don't really know, but I shouldn't think so.

D: Would several people share one of the lorries?

H: yes. You'd get a family. Because everybody knew everybody in the streets there. Where I was in Bermondsey they did. Nobody shut their doors or anything, everybody knew everybody. You got on all so well. It was all a big laugh and a joke then, a totally different way of life.

D: So, were you living in the same streets where the hoppers were?

H: I see them going off because, because I was in the docks then, and I come up from Lewisham and up through Bermondsey and into the Surrey docks. Over the years I saw it gradually fade out altogether. The fields became more and more mechanical, picking and that, so the numbers gradually decreased each year. I believe they still do some handpicking.

D: There's a little bit people tell us about. This picture over here, that's what it's like now. Picking leaves out the hops on a conveyor belt.

H: I believe there is still some picking off the trees though, in the Hastings area. The bins. Maybe they're for something special, but when I was down Hastings about three years ago, they were telling me that they still went out, the locals, to certain fields to pick by hand.

D: Is this picture a ticket?

H: Looks very much like it. The thing was, the colouring was different to the ordinary ones. there again that's Paddock Wood.

D: Because it looks to me as if the farmer had sent this to the picker? Meet from London Bridge at eleven; would that be in the evening?

H: Morning. August.

D: Would that be around the time that you were doing it?

H: Yes. I said early September. That's probably one of my years. Yes. I think I did it '51, '52, '53.

D: It must have been an incredible amount of noise on the platform?

H: Oh yes, it was quite a sight to see. Most of the time the trains had actually got the rolling stock into the platform before they got there. But occasionally you had problems and they were already on the platform. Quite a sight to behold. Certainly unusual.

D: Did people take animals down with them?

H: No. There were animals taken down but usually by lorry. I can't remember a single case of taking dogs or anything. I can't say they weren't taken down, but I can't remember at all seeing any.

D: Did you like working on the hopping train?

H: Oh yes. It was certainly something different. We were so limited, it was only guards up on the Bricklayers Arms and spare ones, which I was always, being at Stewarts Lane, which is a sort of, the same section but quite a distance away.

D: Would people want to get on that duty?

H: No. Most guards - but I can't speak for nowadays, because I left the railway late '50's - you had set duties, you had a roster. So, you went round each week you'd start 8 a.m., the next week you'd be on late turns, which'd start about 2, and the following week you might be on nights. Not that they

have many night trains these days, but we used to. And so, you started midnight or something. And you went right through that roster. So, you were set. Then they had spare people like myself, we were goods guards and passenger guards. So, we went wherever there was. They would give us the previous week tell us what we were going to do. And we always fell for these sorts of jobs.

D: You picked the extra duties?

H: Yes. It was always us or the other guards at Bricklayers Arms, might be a couple of passenger guards from London Bridge itself, they only had passenger guards there.

D: Did people coming back, were you guard on the train coming back at the end of the hop picking?

H: I can only remember doing one day.

D: I suppose people were in a really good mood at the end, they'd been paid?

H: Oh yes. But I think they got through that more or less as they went along. Certainly, spent in the pubs, I can remember that.

D: Was there a lot of singing going on?

H: No, I don't think so, it doesn't ring a bell, I can't remember.

D: Did anyone give you a souvenir bunch of hops?

H: I had some, just something I picked up myself. Completely different wasn't it.

D: I think people have said that they feel it's a shame that it's gone.

H: Yes. It was a family thing. They all go abroad now. But they haven't got the unity that they had in those days; the family connection is still there, but not the neighbourly connection. There were streets and that where everybody got on so well, and so many people would go down, it was a community feeling that's something of the past.

D: When you were working at Surrey docks, whole streets going down, it must have been quiet then?

H: Yes. But by the late '50's hopping was on its way out. You could tell it was getting less and less people going down. No, you wouldn't notice it all that much. And more and more cars were coming in and loads of people had their cars and they weren't piling them on the lorries so much. And they just gradually decreased right the way through.

D: Do you think it's a shame?

H: I personally do, yes. They were the salt of the earth, those people. I also had jobs to do with the docks, arranging dances and that sort of thing there. When you arranged a dance, people got up and danced from the start. Most places you go to, they're nearly at the last waltz before they even get on the floor; they just sit there all evening. And then at the end they're shouting for more, and they want you to go on. But not there, round Bermondsey, directly the music started they'd get up and dance.

D: It's a different attitude of getting the best out of life you can get.

H: Oh, it is.

D: Thanks for coming in, you've filled in some gaps for us that's really handy.