

Florence Burgess: Hop Picking.

P: With Mrs. Florence Burgess, on the 12th July, Flat 3, Longfield [Northfield?] House, 22 Weston Road, Plaistow. E13. Tel: 470 6250.

P: Could you explain to me why you got married when you did, just before the war.

F: My husband's birthday was the 1st. We got married on the 2nd. The war was declared on the 3rd. Why we got married quick: We had our Bans in St. Mary's Church to get married at the end of September, but my husband, being a Reservist, he was one of the first to get called up, and he was expecting his calling up papers. So, my mum went hop picking every year, that was our annual holiday, the lorry was outside to take her. We used to have a lorry to take all our things - everything barring the kitchen sink. Well they'd gone off. I was scrubbing my mum's passage and my husband to be came down and said, "Come on, we're getting married." I was flabbergasted. I said, "Why?" He said, "Well I'm expecting me papers." So, I said, "Well, we got our bans in the church, how can we do it?" So, he said, "Well I'll go down to the vicar and ask his opinion." He said, "Well, I can't give you my opinion. I've got to phone through to the Archbishop of Canterbury to get a special licence and having the Sanctuary Westminster left open for you." He did that, we came back, and we had a greengrocer's business. My brother shut the shop. Him and his wife got the car out and took us to Westminster. We never knew where it was. We just parked the car in a cul-de-sac, got out and asked somebody the way, and they said, "You've parked just in front of the door." When he opened the door there was a doorman stacking all sandbags up, and he said, "Are you the couple from St Marys?" We said, "Yes." He said, "Well don't wait your turn, because you won't get back to the church in time." Because if you got back a certain time, they weren't allowed to marry you. So, he said, "When the next couple come down from upstairs, you go straight up." And when he opened the door, we had a shock, they were lined up the stairs couples to get special licence because of the crisis. So anyway, we got this special licence, and we got back to the church just in time. We went straight up, because we had to get back to the church in time. The other couples said nothing. So, we got back to the church and there was not a soul in the church, we never had a buttonhole, nothing; just the four of us. My brother gave me away, and my sister-in-law was best man; and I think I must have been the first woman that had a woman for a best man. Yes, because it's been known since, but not then. And it's on my marriage certificate. That was because everybody had already gone to the hop fields.

P: Why could they not wait to go; was it because they were taking other people?

F: They didn't know I was getting married. They'd gone before my husband came down. See, and I was clearing up after they'd gone, then he came down.

P: What happened then?

F: We came back. We had kippers for tea, at my sister's. That was our wedding breakfast. We never had a bouquet, a buttonhole, or anything. And as I got up from the altar I looked, and I had a ladder right at the back of my stockings. That is my husband's photo.

P: Before you were married; what year was that; in the '30's?

F: Must be. I'll get my wedding certificate out and show you.

P: Oh yes. Marriage certificate, 1939, 2nd of September.

F: That was my sister-in-law, and that was my brother.

P: Plaistow Parish Church.

F: That's just round the corner. But they pulled the old one down and there's a small one there now.

P: And he was an Arsenal examiner. What does that mean.

F: He worked in the Arsenal. On the research. He was home, working before he was recalled.

P: So, you had a best woman. What happened after you had your kippers for tea.

F: On the Sunday.

P: Did you have a home to move into?

F: Yes, we had a flat, getting a ready flat at the end of September. And on the Sunday, the day after, my brother decided to take a lorry load of fruit and vegetables down to the hop fields to sell. We went with him; the first day of our honeymoon. So, going along, all of a sudden, the sirens went. War was declared. Please take cover. So instead of getting off and taking cover, my brother got off and covered all the fruit and vegetables over.

P: More worried about those than you?

F: Yes. So anyway, we ended up at the hop fields. But since we were children, we went to the hop fields every year, with my mum and dad, because that was our only holiday.

P: Just to go back to this particular day, what was your mother's reaction when you got down to the hop fields and you said you'd got married?

F: Well she knew we were getting married at the end of September. We explained it to her, and it was quite alright.

P: Was she sad that she hadn't had an opportunity to be there?

F: No. Because she loved her hop picking. She wouldn't miss that. Anyway, this is the photo. It's a very old one mind you.

P: This is of your mum?

F: My mum and dad. It's a lovely photo.

P: Which hop fields was this taken in?

F: Marden.

P: That was where you went every year?

F: Every year. Wheeler's farm. Every year.

P: Wheeler's Farm.

F: And my dad, apart from picking there, used to be what you call a pole puller. That means to say, the binds they grew in fours. Binds. And as you pulled them you put them over the bin, like my mum's doing. Well sometimes they left what they call a head. Well it's my dad's job with his pole to go and knock them down. Because they were the best of the hops.

P: He wasn't on stilts?

F: No.

P: They were earlier in the year, the stilt man?

F: Yes.

P: How did he get them down then?

F: With the hook on the end of the pole, he had a long pole with a hook on, and he used to unhook them.

P: Would you have been born at that point? You would, wouldn't you?

F: Oh yes. We used to go every year with them.

P: That would have been taken in the 1920's or the '30's.

F: Oh no. I was born 1915. That must have been taken later than that. Well my mum's been dad about twenty years.

P: And were you the last of her children, or the first?

F: No. There was ten of us; five girls and five boys. I was - got to reckon up. There was Ginny, Hetty, Charlie, Annie - I was about the fifth. Five girls and five boys there was. But there's only three of us, four of us left; three girls and one boy. And I'm the eldest. I'm 77 nearly.

P: You would have been around at the time and you went every year?

F: Yes.

P: From little girl?

F: From before I was courting sort of thing, and that growing up a bit. But then I didn't go. But I went all the years we was children. But I tell a fib. Because one year, two of my children, I had four, but I only had two then. And it was only a year and a half between them. And they had whooping cough. And the doctor advised me to take them somewhere where they were using tar. Supposed to have been good for them. So, my mum said, "Why don't you come down there?" I took them down there. And they were tarring round the field. And I'm busy picking on these bins, and all of a sudden, they come up holding hands, "We fell in the tar." They was covered from head to foot in tar. Well we had what they call a hut, it was a red cross place with nurse in, and we had to take them up there, and had to cut all there, had to wash them.

P: Cut all their hair off?

F: Yes. But we've had some laughs. There was five weeks we're down there and it rained nearly every day.

P: That same year.

F: Yes.

P: Did they get better the kids?

F: Yes. They did. Well they're grown up, got children, grandchildren of their own as well now.

P: I wonder if it works, the tar cure?

F: Well. That was it.

P: You were saying there was one year you didn't go. That wasn't the year you didn't go?

F: No. No. That was the year I went with the children.

P: You said you missed one year.

F: I missed, since then with the children, because it was a full-time job. Well not only that, we had the greengrocers round the corner, and it was too busy. But my husband was in the army, right until the end of the war.

P: And did you look forward to going hopping?

F: Yes. It was our annual holiday. Because in those days you couldn't afford to go abroad, or anywhere like that. But my mum wouldn't miss it for the world, she loved it.

P: She always went to the same farm?

F: Yes. Wheeler's Farm at Claygate, Marden.

P: And did you always have the same hut?

F: Yes. They kept it for mum special. And we used to have what we call faggots, they're like bundles of wood. We used to get them, make the beds with them, and then hay on top. And my mum used to take curtains, and divide it off into, so the different bedrooms, and that. But when that five weeks I was down with the children, I used to be the first one up, to light the fire outside - we used to have fires outside. And I was the last one trying to still get it alight when all the others was up, and up the field! And then we used to say, "Alright mum, time for tea; shall I go and make a pot of tea?" And I used to come back to the hut, make a pot of tea, and take it back to her.

P: Was the hut quite close to where they were picking?

F: No, it was a little walk, but not far really; just up the lane.

P: So, would she have just the one hut for all the kids. Or would she take two or three?

F: Just the one.

P: There wasn't actually a charge for the huts was there?

F: No.

P: So, if you had a great big family like that, with eventually ten kids, wouldn't she be able to have say two or three?

F: She never took the ten altogether. Some of them are grown up. Didn't want to go. When they're getting in their teens and that they didn't want to go. So, the others used to go with her.

P: You carried on wanting to go even through your teens, did you?

F: Well, not once I'd married.

P: But as a teenage girl?

F: Yes. Well we used to have our work up here. But we used to go down for weekends. And oh, it was lovely.

P: Did you make a lot of friendships down there, or did you mainly go with friends from here?

F: Well sort of families, you know; any of the other the family used to want to go, we used to go together. But of the evening it was terrific, we used to get round the fire with the piano accordion going. It was lovely. Anybody that could.

P: What sort of things did they sing to the piano accordion?

F: My old man, follow the van; and all them sort of old ones. They used to sort of make their own up, with different words. But they were laughable you know. Funny. And the weekends we used to go down there was little tiny pub down the bottom of the lane, The White Hart, and we used to sit out there on the seat. And the children would have lemonade or something, and the grownups had what they wanted. Come back and cook the dinner. Used to have a really good time.

P: Do you remember any really clever bits of cooking that your mum did, or that you did, using those quite difficult facilities?

F: Well we used to do like big pots on the fire. 'Cause you never had no roast or anything, only potatoes in their jackets, you could put them on the fire. Or boiled eggs or fried bacon, anything fried and that; but you couldn't have a baked dinner.

P: Although some people did seem to have managed to do that. I don't know how they did it, actually.

F: Well there was nothing there when we went.

P: No. But would you say you ate quite well?

F: Oh yes. It was healthy living. Out in the open air.

P: What did you do when it rained?

F: You just put up with it.

P: Did you? I mean things like keeping a fire alight and cooking must have been hell on the earth?

F: Yes. Well you used to try and make like a little bit of a tin shelter or something over the top of the fire, so that the fire still kept light. But I remember when I was down there with the children for that five weeks, it rained so much, I had to send home to my husband to bring Wellington boots down. It was so rainy.

P: Was it always the women's' job to get the fire going and do the cooking? Not the men's'?

F: No. The men mucked in as well. Oh yes. Well, my dad did. I don't know about the others.

P: What about things like washing up; how did you manage with the washing up?

F: Well you heat the water on the pot, took your own bowl and everything down, soap powder. Do your washing as well like that.

P: What sort of bowls?

F: Plastic.

P: This was in the plastic days. But earlier on you wouldn't have had plastic?

F: Oh no. They were tin. When I first got married, I never had a bathroom, I had a bungalow bath, tin bungalow bath. It's the shape of a - like that shape - and it used to hang outside, outside toilet. That was only twenty odd years ago.

P: That you got a bathroom?

F: Yes.

P: Of your memories of hop picking, which are more vivid; those of going as a mother or as a child?

F: As a child. We used to go scrumping. And in one hop field there used to be - it wasn't a river, it was like a ditch filled with water, and over the other side was beautiful apple trees. Orchard. So, when nobody was looking, we went across there, and they used to throw down. And then as we were coming down the lane coming home from the hop field - we used to come down this little lane ¼- it belonged to the farmer - there was these big haystacks and that and all the chickens used to run around. Well we knew that they used to go under the haystack and lay their eggs. So of course, being children, we used to put our hands under and see if there was any eggs under there. So, we had eggs for breakfast, dinner, tea.

P: I've not heard that one before, that's interesting. So, your mum would encourage you?

F: No. She wouldn't know until we'd got them.

P: But she wasn't sorry?

F: Oh no. She wouldn't say, "Take them back." Put it that way. Because the farmer didn't miss them.

P: What about the locals. Did you have a lot to do with the local kids?

F: No, they never mixed. They were what you call home dwellers. When my mum gave up hop picking, when it all turned to machinery, and they put all them off and just had their own pickers, people that lived there.

P: Was she really sad about that?

F: Yes, that's what really broke her up, finish.

P: It was such a lifeline to her?

F: That's right. She used to look forward to it so much.

P: What was it that made it so special for her, do you think?

F: Well it was company, all the different people. And they were all of the same sort. You know, there was no high and mighty people, or anything like that. They all mucked in together and shared everything. If somebody never had anything, there was always somebody there to help them out. Not like nowadays. If anybody was ill, they did what they could for them.

P: And what was her like the rest of the time, when she wasn't hop picking; was she in her older years?

F: Yes.

P: What was her life like?

F: Well, she didn't go out much.

P: Did she live with one of her children?

F: No. I had one sister that was single at home. And we lived in a tight community, you might say. I had the corner shop. It was only just round the corner in Queen's Road, I had the corner shop there.

My mum lived opposite there, with my younger sister. Two doors from her lived an elder sister. Just down the road opposite the church where I got married my other sister lived. Two of my brothers had shops in Queens Road, just round the corner. Another brother lived just round the corner there. And there was only one that really lived away and that was only at Forest Gate, St James Lane.

P: Was it a tight family; you saw each other a lot?

F: Oh, we was always in and out. And my mum used to make fabulous bread puddings. And all the neighbours used to line up at the door. Always did.

P: From what you say, she certainly wasn't isolated. But there must have been something different and special about the hopping

that gave her such pleasure; what was that?

F: It was a different way of life. It was picking the hops. You know and waiting for the measurer to come round measure them. He used to have a big basket, and he used to measure the hops and put them into that. And they used to call out, "One, two." and all that. And then before he came, he used to have to go over them when you knew he was coming, and pick out if any leaves had dropped in. Otherwise you'd have short measure.

P: Was she a good picker?

F: Oh yes.

P: And enjoyed the work?

F: Yes. And everybody knew my mum. Everybody knew her.

P: 'Cause she'd been doing it all her life?

F: Yes.

P: I suppose there must have been other friendships that were special to the hop picking time.

F: Yes.

P: That you'd only see when you went hopping; is that right?

F: No, we had one or two people that used to come and visit mum after she come home, during the hop picking season. I suppose it's talk about the next time they were going.

P: But some of the relationships, she just knew them at the hop picking?

F: Yes.

P: What would she be wearing, her standard hop picking clothing?

F: Overall. And a turban. To keep anything from going in as you pull the hops down; 'cause when the binds were up you used to have to pull them down yourself and put them across the bins.

P: Did you actually enjoy the physical task of hop picking, or did you regard it as an awful chore?

F: I used to like it. When I went down with the children, I had what they call half a bin. They'd do it up in the middle, the people, and you had half and somebody else had half.

P: Did you find someone nice to share it with you or did it depend?

F: Well, very hard to make friends really. They have to talk to me first before I can.

P: You're reserved, are you?

F: Yes. Then, once I get to know them, like here. I know them all I talk to them all. I don't know any special friends, only Valery, and the other warden; they are my special friends. They're more friends to me than wardens.

P: When you were young and you went on a trip like this, what about the young men; did you meet any nice young men down the hop fields?

F: Well, used to have a laugh, but that was as far as it went. A laugh and a joke.

P: What about a dance?

F: No, we never used to go dancing; I did when I was in my teens, I used to go nearly every week.

P: But not down in Kent?

F: No.

P: So, the leisure things, you'd be sitting round the fire?

F: Yes. And sing song or go for walks. Play cards, we'd play cards if a night-time.

P: You say you went for walks?

F: Yes, in the country lanes. To look round and see what was what.

P: With your brothers and sisters?

F: Yes. Or friends that you made. Girlfriends. Then you used to walk up to the village and get the shopping. That was a little walk.

P: Were there quite a few little village shops?

F: Yes.

P: At Marden?

F: Yes.

P: What would they be?

F: There was a butcher's, greengrocer's, a little cafe. When you went up there you used to sit and have a drink, after you got your shopping. But then on the hop field they used to come round and then all of a sudden you'd hear a cry go up, "The lolly man's here." The kids. And all used to run to their mum's, "Mum, want a lolly." And they used to have that. Or the ice cream man used to come.

P: What were the lollies like in those days?

F: They were just ordinary lollies; not a lot of flavours, just the one flavour and that was it, but it was more ice-cream as well.

P: On a stick, the lollies?

F: Yes. But then the lolly man was sweets as well. That's what they called the lollies really.

P: How did the local greengrocers react when greengrocers came down from London to sell?

F: Well they were out of it a little. You had to walk or ride to get there. So that was handy. You used to go straight on to where mum was, and they all used to know when he was coming.

P: So, they would drive to the hop fields, would they?

F: Yes. Right on the hop fields.

P: They wouldn't have actually parked outside the greengrocer's shop.

F: No. No way! It was always weekends; the shops are shut Sundays. So, he used to drive right out to mum's hut really.

P: What other traders used to go down there?

F: The meat man used to come along in a van. But I think he belonged down there, but he used to come up.

P: Could you get fish down there?

F: No, not very often. Not unless they went fishing and caught any.

P: Did you ever do that?

F: I've been fishing up here, but not down there. I wasn't really old enough to understand.

P: But your brothers, your older brothers used to?

F: Yes, they used to.

P: What did they get?

F: I don't know really the name of the fish.

P: But if they caught something your mum would cook it?

F: If it was what you could eat.

P: Do you have any particular memories of any particular day when something happened down there as a kid, or anything that stands out in your mind?

F: No. Only when the children fell in the tar.

P: What happened if a child was ill?

F: You'd taken them to this place they had down there with the nurse there.

P: Who were those nurses?

F: The red cross.

P: Were they working down there as volunteers?

F: I think so. They were very good people.

P: And they had a tent?

F: Yes. And if it was so serious, they'd send her an ambulance.

P: Do you remember a child being ill down there?

F: No, not that I can remember.

P: Did you have a lot to do with other voluntary organisations, like church groups or mission groups that came down there?

F: No. You didn't see many of them there. I can't recollect them.

P: Perhaps they were concentrating on the bigger farms?

F: Might be, because there was a bigger farm further up and that's where mum ended up there because Wheelers Farm, they shut down with all machines and they transferred them up to Paddock Wood. But then when they had machines that was it. But they weren't there long before they had machines.

P: So, the farm you were at was a much smaller affair altogether?

F: Oh yes. It was a family thing. We knew all the family.

P: How many families of Londoners would go down there?

F: About a dozen or more. About twenty.

P: You knew the farmer's family?

F: Oh yes.

P: What was their name?

F: I know one of the sons was called John.

P: You got to know them that, well did you?

F: Oh yes.

P: Did any of the hopping girls marry anyone from down there? F: No.

P: Was that a bit of an ambition to marry?

F: Yes, that was too far up.

P: Do you remember any of the girls as teenagers dressing up and trying to catch the eye of the farmer's sons?

F: Not really; we just dressed up to please ourselves sort of thing to go out.

P: Did some of the fellows come down at weekends?

F: Yes, a load of visitors used to come down at weekends. We really looked forward to weekends, because you all got together and you went down there, the White Hart; the old piano accordion, and it was really a sing song. No fights, all the years I can remember there was no fights, nothing like that.

P: Was the White Hart one of the pubs that let the hoppers inside? Or did they leave you outside?

F: No, inside.

P: Because you know a lot of the pubs didn't seem to want the hoppers inside.

F: Not this one.

P: You were welcome?

F: Yes. They had seats outside. Because it was so small the pub, some were outside. But you could go in if you wanted to.

P: Did you mix with the locals in the pub or were they in the other bar?

F: Well they didn't used to use it much, not while we were there. A couple of them was, but not that amount. I suppose they had their own one that they used to go to.

P: Were there any photographs taken of you as a girl down the hop fields?

F: Not down the hop fields, no.

P: Do you have a photograph of yourself as a youngster?

F: One of when I was about 18.

P: I'd love to have a look at that.

F: A very old one.

P: A bit glamorous is it?

F: Not really. No. It's a very small one as well.

P [Someone else has joined them]: You never went hopping then?

Other Lady: No. I was born in '42.

P: A lot of it was over by then.

O: I do remember going off to do it. But I think my mum was a bit funny like that.

P: Oh, that's sweet.

F: They said it don't look like me, but it is.

P: That looks as though it was taken in one of those photo booths.

F: Gerome's.

O: Tell you what you look like your mum. When would that be, in the '50's.?

P: In the '50's because by that time they didn't approve of kids taking time off school.

O: And then having six weeks holiday.

P: As well.

O: As well.

P: Do you remember being in any trouble for missing school to go hop picking?

F: Oh yes!

P: You as a parent being in trouble, or you as a child?

F: As a child.

P: What happened?

F: We used to come back, "We know where you've been; hopping." And course you'd have to stay in after school and catch up with what you missed.

P: Where were you at school?

F: Cade Road - or I'd finished at Cade Road, but I was at Upton Cross School.

P: Didn't they just take it for granted that half the kids would...?

F: Yes. Well, they used to try, because some of it came in your school holidays. According to what the season was like; if the hops weren't ready to pick, it was later. If they were alright, it weren't too bad.

P: When you came back all rosy cheeked, do you remember other kids in your class being envious of you?

F: No, some of them used to shun you because you'd been hop picking?

P: Really?

F: Oh yes.

P: What sort of shun?

F: Just comments. Snobbery.

P: It was considered not the thing to do?

F: Yes. It was beneath them. 'Cause you went hop picking. They used to think you were lousy when you come back, to be quite honest.

P: And they'd tease you about that?

F: But it's one of the cleanest of things; they used to do your hair; your mum used to do; make sure - well my mum did - we was clean as new pins.

P: And probably very well.

F: Yes. You felt better for it. And you got all that fresh air and everything.

P: What about the money side of it; did your mum actually also need the money?

F: Yes. They used to go for the money. I can't tell lies and say they didn't; they did. But that five weeks I don't think I earned enough; I was down there with the children.

P: For you it was more of a holiday?

F: Yes.

P: Well you was on this half bin anyway.

F: You used to have to pick because you were there. You couldn't just stand and watch, you had to pick.

P: And did your children enjoy it as well as you?

F: Yes. But mum used to say, "Come on! Have a little pick on the bin." And then when you shift it from one place to another, when you pulled those four vines down you, you shifted it into the next

one. Well, of course there was a lot left on the floor. Especially when dad used to pull the tops down. And said, "Go on; go round and pick all the hops up." So, we used to have to go through the line and pick all the hops up that had got on the floor and put them in the bin.

P: And did you go with your own mother, so your mother was with the children, she was with her grandchildren?

F: No. I had a hut on my own, when I went with the children.

P: But was your mother still going?

F: Yes. I wouldn't have gone there, not without her.

P: She would have then spent a lot more time with the grandchildren than she might normally have done.

F: Yes. I only had the two then.

P: I get the impression, talking to people that that was really important for grandparents.

F: Oh yes. And especially weekends when they all come down, and all the family got together. Oh, it's great. We had some great times.

P: Well thank you very much Mrs Burgess that was great that was very interesting.

P: Just a note to say that when Mrs Burgess has a wedding anniversary now, she buys herself a bouquet of flowers, 2nd of September, to make up for the ones she didn't have on her wedding day.