

Joan Clarkson: Hopping

P: 11th July 1991. Talking to Joan Clarkson at the Reminiscence Centre. of 154 Williton Road, Blackheath, SE3 8QN. Tel: 856 4564.

P: We're going to Whitbread today, Paddock Wood.

J: It had to be Beltring Farm. There's a pub across the road we used to call the Bell - I think that's short for Bluebell, or something like that, but there's a big public house with seats outside.

P: When did you go there?

J: 1937, '38 and '39. That's where I was when the war broke out. I was blackberry picking when war was declared, and when we came back, because we were missing and war had started, my gran slapped us all. She was so worried.

P: Did you come back immediately when the war was declared?

J: We were going to and then we decided not to. My school had already gone away. So, my father thought we would be better off there than in London. So, we stayed. I remember going out to the fields I think it was the next day, and the air raid siren went, and the plane came over - it was only one plane; it was English anyway, but my grandmother threw us all in the ditch. To protect us, by a hedge, and there was a sort of ditch. Fortunately, it was dry. And she pushed us all in there, and she knelt on the green verge, and she got out her rosary and she was saying the Hail Mary. She never thought about that she could be machine gunned or anything.

P: She didn't get in the ditch herself?

J: No. She pushed us all in the ditch for safety - because there was my mother and my sister and I. My grandmother had children the same age as my sister and my brother - who died - would have been, because my mother was the eldest of the family, you know they had children for many years then, my grandmother had nine children. And my mother being the oldest, the youngest we grew up with!

P: So, you all went hop picking, together did you?

J: We used to go down to my gran's. My gran, it was her ticket, because you used to have to have tickets to go. We used to wait every, through the school holidays, August, "Have you got your letter, nan, have you got your letter." Until you got your letter, you didn't know you were going to be allowed to go.

P: Did she always get the letter from the same farm?

J: Yes. Always she picked for Whitbread, until the year she died. And then my mother took her ticket over; she used to go and take my sister and her two boys. You used to have to wait for your letter to arrive before you could go, because you always had the same hut. On Whitbread farm you had - ooh it was quite flash really for those days - you had a two-story

hut. They were built in blocks of six, two at the side, two at the front, two at the other side. They were brick built at the bottom. But the upstairs - 'cause you had two rooms - the upstairs was built of tin, and you had a tin roof with a skylight. Which was lovely when you could see the sun, and the stars and things. But people used to paint them to keep out the light. But when it used to rain it used to bang on the tin roof!

P: So, you remember as a child sleeping in the upstairs and looking out at the stars?

J: Looking out through the skylight at the sun.

P: Could you open the skylight?

J: That I don't remember.

P: Was that unusual to have a two-story hut?

J: Oh yes.

P: That was a bit posh was it?

J: Yes. Whitbread's was always a model farm. They're still there the huts, to the best of my knowledge. There used to be across from us was a row of one story single wooden ones. My gran was always afraid of fire, she would never have had one of those. Most hop farms they had the same thing. They were just - one story you had one room, you ate, you slept in. You did cooking; most farms you cooked outside on open fires, Whitbread's used to provide us with cookhouses. Brick built tin roofed, but three, back to back, three fireplaces in each. Each side was about as long as this, about two thirds, and there were three chimneys, for three fireplaces, so three huts this side, a fireplace each. And they used to provide you with bundles of wood where they cleared the, when they used to trim all the hedges and things, they were like twigs. They used to call them faggots; they were all tied up or wired up; usually tied up with string, and they used to provide them for you to burn.

P: But most people burnt them outside, didn't they?

J: Yes.

P: But in your huts you could actually make a fire indoors?

J: No. Outside. It was a separate building. Between each there would be a block of six huts. And then so many feet away there would be a cook house, of three this side and three the other side for the three huts.

P: And did your family use those?

J: We used them, and you had a rod across, and you used to put

pipes on. But then my mother acquired - I don't remember from where - a double burner oil stove, with an oven on top. I don't remember, we never had a roast dinner; I don't know how they used to manage it, but we always had a roast dinner Sunday. I only remember the weather being good. Sundays was wonderful. We used to have a big trestle table. Father used to come for the day - because he hated it. He didn't like it. He only allowed us to go

because I'd been very ill, and my mother had almost had a breakdown, because they'd lost a child. And she never recovered. I was a frail child, and I'd been very ill. And I don't ever remember going before then. So, I think, afterwards, it was because I'd been ill, and my mother had been ill. She never talked about it, she never made any fuss about it, she never ever spoke about my brother; so, I think that's probably why she didn't. He was 15 months old when he died. He'd had pneumonia three times, and he had pneumonia and measles. But, tracing back from my daughter and my grandchildren, we were lactose intolerant, something they didn't know about then. I was lactose intolerant.

P: That meant you had to be bottle fed?

J: No. No milk.

P: No milk at all.

J: Milk is what makes it worse. I'm not as severe as my granddaughter, who's not allowed milk of any shape, size or form.

P: So that must have made it much more difficult to keep a healthy child in those days?

J: Yes. But they didn't know about lactose intolerance whatsoever. I was a very frail. Because it affects your immune system you see. We started to trace back when my granddaughter was dying, after she was born. And we traced it back to when I was ill and my brother died and my sister was ill, and they said that in all probability we were lactose intolerant.

P: So, as a six or seven-year-old when you went out there, you were still quite a frail little thing?

J: Yes. I think that's why we went. Because I was six the year, I was very ill in Guy's hospital. And I was seven the first time I remember going.

P: Did they want to build you up?

J: I think so because we had freedom. I didn't pick hops, only if I wanted to; we didn't have you do anything! We roamed the fields; we went scrumping - very naughty - blackberry picking. We just roamed.

P: How many of you?

J: My gran was a widow. They were my young aunts and uncles, but we grew up together. They had to pick. Because she didn't have any money coming in. I don't know if she had a widow's pension even. She may have done.

P: So, the kids were actually needed?

J: Most people picked. It was a holiday, but it was a working holiday. They needed the money the children picked. My sister and I we were very lucky. We didn't have to. My mum only picked because she wanted to go and take us away, you see, it was good for us.

P: What was the work your dad was doing at the time?

J: My father was a crane driver.

P: He wouldn't have given up a decent paid job like that; anyway, he didn't want to go?

J: He didn't like it. It wasn't my father's thing. He would come down...

P: Didn't like roughing it?

J: No. He didn't like to rough it. He would come down every Sunday - he used to bring my mother her housekeeping money every Sunday, so she didn't have to work! She didn't have to pick! So, he would always come Sunday. Occasionally he would come Saturday.

P: And stay over?

J: Yes. But you see, your bed there was like a wooden frame. You would take a mattress; they would provide you with straw and fill it. If you slept upstairs, the first years you wouldn't have a wooden frame like that; you would have the bundles of twigs I told you about, you would put those across the floor; you would put a straw mattress on top. But my mum used to take a palliath and put on top of that.

P: A separate mattress?

J: Yes. A palliath was a thinnish mattress which you put on top of that and then you made your bed. You took your pillows and everything.

P: So, your mum had been going for years?

J: No. I don't remember my mum going before then. My grandmother had.

P: Did she not take your mum?

J: I don't know. That is something - you see, my mother didn't grow up at home. She was brought up by her grandmother.

P: Was that because there was so many children?

J: Probably. You know they had children one after the other didn't they. When she was fourteen and she could go out to work, she could earn wages, which is what they did.

P: Do you remember what the atmosphere was like, because it was mainly women. Was it a happy atmosphere?

J: Oh yes, wonderful. Everybody was - although it was primarily to earn money. See women couldn't get jobs easily. For my gran it was a way of life; you got away from everything for four or five weeks. She had older children at home, earning money paying the rent. They would come weekends; they would come down Sunday for the day.

P: How did they get down?

J: You got a train from London Bridge to Beltring Halt. You probably stood all the way; trains were packed with people, parents, families all coming down. Lots of grandmothers took their grandchildren you see.

P: So, the parents would come down at the weekend to see the kids?

J: Yes.

P: The middle generation.

J: Yes. We had wonderful time. Most children had to pick, for them it was hard. But when you sort of finished, you went home, and you were washed, or you were bathed. Salvation Army were there. You could send your children over to them with a penny and a towel, and they would bath them.

P: Do you remember being done?

J: No. Mother wouldn't allow us to go. Because she was so protective of us. We might have caught something. She terrible my mother. She put a fine tooth come through our hair every night. Oh, she used to be dreadful, she was so overprotective.

P: Were there some rough kids around?

J: No. We could go and play with them. But she bathed us.

P: How did she do that?

J: Got great big pots of water, and big kettles. We had hanging on hooks.

P: Did you take a tin bath?

J: We always had one down there. You see if you went every year, at the end of the year there was a big room over by the oast house, and you used to be able to do things up and put your name on them. You could tie labels on things, and pack things in the bath. And you would cover them all.

P: So, they were there for the next year?

J: Yes. You would roll up your lino. Because my grandmother used to put line down on the floor. And she would put her broom in it and tie it all up, with a label on. So, your first day there they used to open the oast, and you used to go over and they used fetch things out and call your name and you would collect the things you left there. But when you went - my grandmother had what we used to call her hopping box. It was a large wooden box, she had it built, on wheels. It was like a chest, as big as chest, but built of wood with a lid, on wheels, so that it was easy to push and manoeuvre about. And in that she used to pack everything she used to take every year. She'd pack her linen for the bed; she would pack their clothes, and woolly, so that, being a widow on her own she couldn't have too many cases and bags. So, in this used to go most of the things that she took. A wonderful oil lamp; beautiful oil lamp. And her books to read. My gran used to read. And my mother.

P: Did she read aloud to you?

J: No, she played cards with us. Snap; what I know now to be Gin Rummy.

P: Let's have a look at that.

J: This is a copy of the photo. The only one I had.

P: She looks a character.

J: She was.

P: Who's got the original photo?

J: My brother-in-law. My sister had all the photos taken. He's gone to live in Perth.

P: It's a wonderful photo.

J: She's sitting on the bins. This is the side of the bin; the poles. They were packing.

P: What is this?

J: Those are the hops.

P: Does she pull off those hanging bits?

J: You pull off the hops. You're not supposed to pick leaves. My grandmother did.

P: To fill up the basket quicker? Oh, naughty girl.

J: If I used to want to pick, she used to tie up - we had a piece of string, put round the end about a quarter round the end. She used to get me to pick those, because I only picked hops - I didn't pick leaves! And then when the measurer was coming round, she used to untie those and shuffle all hers up to make it look like - she used to throw mine on top. I used to have to pick the leaves out of my grans because my mum had her own bin, you see, and she picked very clean.

P: Did everyone do that?

J: Yes. You would put a child to pick in a poke, which is a big sack, which, when the measurer used to come round had bushel, or two bushel basket. I know you used to be paid so much for two bushels. It wasn't a lot of money. And most people used to sub their money every few days, so what they earnt they used to go and sub it. And at the end of hop picking they didn't have a lot of money. Some people did quite well. A whole family would go, and they really would pick. What my grandmother used to call them - I mean her language could be very ripe.

P: Why did she think the families?

J: Because she thought they were greedy you see.

P: Because they took it so seriously?

J: Yes. I mean, she picked because she was a widow, she had children to support, she needed the money. So, the kids had to pick too. And when they used to measure, it all used to be taken in the basket and put in a big sack, used to call pokes. Don't know if every farm did, but we did. But some of them you would borrow a poke, and you'd roll it down, and the kid would pick in it, because you always picked the leaves, and they would pick them on the top. My grandmother's been told off by the measurer.

P: Wouldn't it be the other way round, the kids be naughty?

J: No. Children are very fastidious, you know?

P: Your nan got told off?

J: Yes. Too many leaves.

P: Could they withhold payment if there were too many leaves?

J: No. They didn't withhold; they would tell them to clean them up. They would pick out leaves and tell them to clean the hops up. And then he'd come back. If they were what they called dirty - too many leaves - they wouldn't even measure; say, "Clean your hops." But you see, if she could get away with it, she would.

P: She looks pretty fierce. What's she wearing?

J: My gran? She used to wear - she was very fat; she doesn't look so fat there. She was about four foot ten.

P: By four foot ten!

J: Yeah, almost. She hated the stuff dropping from her head. So, she always wore a scarf.

P: Did a lot of women do that?

J: Yes. She didn't like the sun on her. So variably she wore a jumper of some sort with like a pinafore skirt over, or this was quite possibly a big apron that she wore. Because under that she would wear her pocket with her money in. It used to be made of cloth, like a butcher's pocket. I used to make one for my husband when he was a butcher, for putting their money in. And she used to wear one under - this is probably her apron, great big apron she used to wear.

P: She almost looks as though she's got some binding on her fingers?

J: No, she hasn't. She had little short fat fingers, my nan.

P: So, people wouldn't wear any kind of gloves?

J: No. Only if you was a child. If you was me or my sister, we was fastidious. Oh, she used to, dreadfully. They are too fussy. You see, if you've been picking hops, your hand gets sort of green and then black, and then it smells. When it used to come to lunch time, man used to come round on his bike blowing a trumpet - I think it was Mr Waghorn, I'm not sure of the name, but I know someone used to come and used to blow a trumpet, you see and that was the lunch break. 'Cause my mum used to do up all sandwiches and food and that to take out, it was like a picnic every day; the food was wonderful. We had a picnic every day. But if we'd been picking hops, it used to get on your sandwich.

P: It came off, the black, did it?

J: And my mum used to tear a piece of the paper off the paper bag

for us to hold our sandwich with. My gran used to think we was dreadfully fastidious!

P: Did you get gloves in the end then?

J: If it was cold in the morning, we always wore gloves. Wouldn't take them off to pick hops.

P: What happened when it was wet?

J: I only remembered being rained off twice.

P: Did they send you back to the huts then?

J: If it was raining very badly, you had to go back, because you couldn't pick in the heavy rain. I remember once there was huts. We all went into that because it was raining very heavily. I don't remember it raining a lot. It just doesn't come to mind. I remember once or twice we had to go in.

P: Did it affect the hops if it was wet?

J: Not really, 'cause they were already grown and ripe and ready for picking, so it didn't make any difference.

P: So, they didn't rot if it was wet?

J: Only that when you did go out - anyway when you went out, you know what September mornings are like; dewy, and it's misty, and I didn't like it in the morning, it was cold. And when you pulled the vine - because they grow up in threes, I think, and you pull one - of course you got showered didn't you, with all the dew and the water, and everything. I didn't like that. Because you would feel wet. My gran and my mother used to laugh it off. But that's the sort of thing I remember, you used to pull them down, you throw them over the bin, and then you start, you start pulling off the branches and picking. When the vines that you've picked, you wind them up. You see, you used to have to leave everything tidy behind you.

P: What happened to the bits that you wound up that you'd already cleared off?

J: As you finished with the vine, it was empty, it just had leaves on, and they used to make your hands [for]. Then you used to twist them round and leave them there. But it was tidy. And when you'd picked all the vines each side of your bin, you would pick your bin up and you would move it, you know, so that you would just move it along the row, because they grow in rows. You just move it along the row. As children, you're sent back, and you pick up any hops that fell on the floor. Sort of like gleaning coal, because you weren't allowed to leave them on the floor.

P: Then did a separate person come and pick up the naked vines?

J: They were left there until the whole field was cleared.

P: What did they do then, did they burn it?

J: I don't know. I suppose they were all cleared off for some reason because they had to be reploughed and got ready for the hops for next year. And they were always called hop gardens.

P: When you went, did you miss school to go?

J: Yes. I mean, school, by the time we came home, they'd been back to school a couple of weeks. But we never used to bother to trouble because as my mum would say, if you took time off to have a holiday during the year, you'd have been missing for a week or two.

P: And were a lot of kids doing it?

J: Yes.

P: What part of London was that?

J: The first year, we went - because my mother was a great mover - we lived in Bermondsey in the Neckinger; the second year, we lived in Rotherhythe, Downtown. The third year - which was when the war started - we lived in New Kent Road, near the Elephant and Castle. But then my gran - we had a big house there - my gran lived up the stairs. When we lived at Rotherhythe, we lived in a flat, and my gran, she came to live there too, about three flats away from us. I used to drive her mad, "Have you got your letter, nan, have you got your letter?"

P: She would definitely get the letter?

J: Oh yes.

P: You were telling me right at the beginning that you were there at the outbreak of war; when did you stop going there?

J: Well I was evacuated. My gran went during the war, I'm sure she did. I don't remember going again until 1940, 1944. We went down for a weekend, when my sister got married. She got married at home, on the Friday, and we went down Saturday and came home Sunday. I don't think I ever went apart from that.

P: Was it just the same?

J: Oh yes. Probably even nicer, because I was older, I was with my sister, and my mum's youngest sister and a friend of hers. I was 14, they were 19. And I was allowed to go out with them. We always had a lot of freedom there. We didn't have it at home. So, we were allowed to go out with local children, really just joining with anything. As long as my mother knew where we were.

P: Did you have special friendships associated with the time of the hop picking?

J: Yes. More or less.

P: I suppose you were such a big family anyway that you were like a group unto yourselves. How many people were in that group?

J: Well there was my gran, my mum, younger sister and two younger brothers. There was my sister and I and my mother. The second year that I remember going, 1938 - my father's brother died, he was only 35, and he'd left four children, three girls and a little baby boy; so, my mother took the three girls. So, my mother had five of us. But she just made one big bed

upstairs, and we all slept in it, and my mother slept on the outside, any sort of room that was left! You did that, people did, just put children all in together, and as we were all girls it didn't make a lot of difference.

P: Did you take sleeping gear?

J: Pyjamas? Oh yes. As far as I know everybody did; but down there, our standards were as our standards at home. My mother... we didn't really rough it in any way, that she could possibly help, but we continued with the same standards.

P: And the cooking too; obviously she'd have to modify that?

J: Yes. But we had; the second year we went she got this double burner oil stove with an oven on. And she used that in the hut.

P: Was that unusual?

J: Yes. So that really outside she only used to, they would boil kettle, the big kettle on the hob. We used to go blackberry picking, my sister and mum's sister Eileen. We used to go scrumping and my gran would make us a big blackcurrant and apple dumpling. It was big, you know, cooked in a cloth. In a very big saucepan outside on that fire in the cook hut. It was lovely.

P: That was every year?

J: Yes. Every year without fail, that was the most marvellous treat, because it was absolutely wonderful.

P: Do you still know how to do that?

J: Vaguely, yes, yes, I do. I gave up cooking with fat about twenty years ago. So, most of these things I have to think about. My husband complains because I don't make these things anymore. It's not good for you: It's not good for me!

P: Would you have a big breakfast before you went off to the hop field?

J: Yes. My gran, she would cook us eggs and bacon, things like that. We used to eat very well there. I loved it when we came home. My mum would always bring home a couple of fresh chickens. We used to go to the farm, and we used to bring home with the feathers on. They just had their legs right, and they used to hang. And we used to have, probably, and my sister and Eileen went scrumping, we used to have a - my gran had one and we had one, it used to be a pillowcase full of what we call Hopping apples. You had some in the harvest festival last year, and big king cooking apples; which was wonderful. Mum used to make apple pies, apple dumplings. It used to be wonderful when we come home the things that we brought home. I suppose, looking back now, it was because everything was so fresh.

P: When you took a pack lunch, what did you have in your sandwiches?

J: It was things like, cheese and, corned beef - we used to love corn beef, with pickle.

P: That was in before the war then?

J: Yes.

P: Would you buy that in tins or did the farm sell that?

J: No. We used to have a butcher some round; used to have a butcher's van every day on the field, well actually on the common, 'cause where you lived was called the common. You would have butcher's van. My father-in-law - I didn't know him then - he used to do it.

P: Your husband was a butcher and that was his father?

J: Yes. They used to come down, and my mum and my gran would buy fresh meat every day.

P: Did they come down from London then?

J: Yes. In an old van. And sometimes they would sell off the back of the van, or they would have the van altered and have a side panel, that came down.

P: These are motorised?

J: Yes. Yes, because my father-in-law had a car even in those days. It wasn't a very good one! But he used to go to market in that.

P: Did your gran ever go to the pub over the road?

J: Yes. Everybody went there weekends. All your family came at the weekend. All ours came on Sunday, occasionally my father would come Saturday night. Everybody got washed and dressed every night you know.

P: Not just weekends?

J: Especially the young. The young had a wonderful time, boyfriends and oh it used to be absolutely marvellous for them. As I say because of the freedom. It was just like a community you see. Nobody had a lot, so everybody really shared what they had. Everybody helped each other. So, you live like a community.

P: As a child, when your family went over to the pub, did you stay outside?

J: No, my dad would take use over and he would buy us a bag of crisps and a lemonade. But of course, my sister was five years older. And mum's sister was the same age. Michael was two and a half years older than I was. Alf was about four years older. My gran would sometimes let them stay, but my dad would send my sister and I back. And we would read. Or we would play cards.

P: You'd read by the light of this oil lamp, would you?

J: Yes.

P: What sort of things were you reading?

J: Children's' books. I don't really remember. I was always an avid reader. We learnt to read very young.

P: And your gran encouraged that did she?

J: My gran always read. My mother read. My father read. As a family we always read.

P: Was that unusual?

J: I think so. The youngest you could be to join the library; I joined the library. I think I was about six. That was in Bermondsey. I joined Bermondsey library because we lived across the road. I lived in The Neckager, that was in Spa Road. I used to go to political meetings there with my father because I wouldn't let him move; everywhere he went I had to go with him! Oh yes, I used to go to political meetings. The Red Flag, I grew up listening to that music.

P: It was a very progressive borough; Bermondsey was the leading Borough for health and welfare, reform and all sorts.

J: We had a beautiful solarium in Grange Road.

P: Did you go to that?

J: No. a lot of children with rickets and that they went there and had sun baths. We lived in a flat upstairs in a house in Neckager. The people who lived downstairs were staunch socialists. And during an election that would be a committee room.

P: Do you remember any electioneering or politicking going on at the hop fields?

J: No. People went primarily to earn money, but it was also a holiday and they enjoyed it.

P: Was the hopping experience quite an important element in that, in families having an opportunity to get together?

J: I think so, because lots of children were my grandparents, lots of mums took the children and went with grandma, you see, like we did.

P: So, you got close to each other?

J: Yes. And it wasn't unusual to grow up with aunts and uncles of your own generation. So, you always had a community life, a lot of family life going on around you. You were always very involved. Someone was getting married; someone was having babies. The year the war started, one of mum's sisters, she got married, the baby was born about July, and her husband was so worried - she came down with the baby, and the point was, your living in the country and it's very rough ground, very difficult to push a pram. My mum went and got an orange box from the fruit sellers, put feather pillows in it, and used the cot blanket, used to take Brian out to the fields in an orange box. Used to put a big umbrella up, and we used to put him...

P: Was he good?

J: Yes.

P: This was your little brother?

J: He would have been a cousin, I suppose.

P: Oh, the little baby brother of the three sisters?

J: My mum's younger sister, it was her first child. He was born about June 1939. Her husband was so worried, because of the war. So, he sent her there, "Go and stay with your mum and be safe." Because you didn't really know it was going to be the phoney war; you thought you were going to be invaded, or there were going to be parachutists; there were all sorts of rumours. He thought she would be safer really in the country.

P: Who was it who got so angry she slapped you when you wasn't there and the war began?

J: This was my same gran. We used to go down to by the River Medway - there was always a lot of people fishing down there. We used to like to go down there, there was I think it was a weir, which used to fascinate me. But there were lots of blackberry bushes and we used to go blackberry picking. If we went down there and saw them oh, we'd think nothing, you'd use your handkerchief and gather blackberries. The fact that it was terribly stained when you got home, mum wouldn't be very pleased. And it was Sunday, so you had your nicest clothes, you had your best clothes on; didn't think about that, like most children. We decided to pick blackberries. We heard the siren; we didn't know what it was. I was nine, my sister was fourteen, and she didn't know what it was. We were all down there picking blackberries. So, when we came home - because my grans heard on somebodies' radio that the war had started, she cried, she remembered the '14, '18 war of course; she cried, and she was so worried because she didn't know where we were. When we came back, we all got a slap! She used to do that because we all giggled! She couldn't bear you to giggle, so every now and again if you kept giggling and she didn't know what you were laughing about, and especially if you were all in a row, you'd get one big mighty slap and you all got a piece of it.

P: Wonderful.

J: She was a terrific character my gran.

P: She looks great in the photograph. What's her name?

J: Martha Perry. It's on the back. My husband wrote that. He's doing a family tree. In our one, we've got lots of pictures. My husband has a wonderful family history. They were photographed in Deptford.