

Joan Miller: Hop Picking.

J: But my name was Hills in those days. I used to be Joan Hills when I was hopping. We used to get down there after the train loads came down from London.

D: You used to live in Maidstone?

J: No, I used to go down from a place called Stone, near Dartford, for a holiday with my grandmother who lived down there. And for a day out, several times, during that fortnight, we would go hop picking, with aunties, two aunties. And don our aprons. Because the hops stained clothes, a brown stain - your fingers are brown when you've finished hop picking, and you have to get them off with soda and stuff, all sorts of things we had to use. It was very hard to get off, we had to scrub them off. And grandma used to put soda and hot water in the bowl, and we used to scrub them until they came off, you know, and they'd wear off in time. But the hop pickers hands were brown at the end of the season - apart from being brown with the sun, because the weather always seemed to be warm in those days except for the sharp showers. And their hands were stained brown.

D: How long did the stain last then?

J: If you were there for six weeks hop picking, the people who came down from London - you didn't have a lot of washing water there, there were no taps laid on in the huts they lived in - and I suppose when they got home it wore off working and doing the washing. Don't forget everybody did their washing by hand in those days, so the mothers would easily get rid of it in the wash day, with soda in the water and that soap that had soda in it. But we used to go down there for the day and get there about seven o'clock, and hour's walk, and that was nothing for children in those days. We used to take one of the prams with our food in for the day, because you eat enormous amounts of food when you're young don't you, especially when you're hop picking because it's a very hot job. It's not hard in the sense that the labour is hard, it's the continual picking, because they don't stop picking. You see the people who went down there to hop pick did it by bushel loads, or two-bushel loads; well they had to keep picking because they wanted the money. But as we were going down there for the day, it didn't matter to us very much if we earned a lot of money or not, it was just for the day out. But you pulled the bine by pulling a string - you were shown how to do it; children were allowed to do it. And once you pulled that string, the bine came down over the hop sack troughs. There was a trough about twenty-foot-long with poles holding the side pieces and struts at the bottom. And they had big bins made of hop sack hanging in between the poles, made of a sort of hessian stuff. And you picked the hops into the thing. And children of course, they're either good pickers or bad pickers; the good pickers didn't pick any leaves with it. And if one of the men, the overseers, came along to collect what was in that bin - every so often they came round with the cart, weighed the stuff. Put the name down of the pickers - and a lot of them used to share one pick, one of these bins, and then share the money out. But if they found a lot of leaf on the number they'd put down in the row that you were in, they used to come down and tell people off and say, "We're not going to give you so much a bushel because there are leaves in there, and we don't want leaves

going into the hops." So, if you were a cleaner picker - and a lot of the people that went down there from London and did it habitually were very, very quick, and clean pickers. Children are apt to put leaves in, so they weren't encouraged to pick many. So, most of the time we ran round the fields and we played with the children who came down from London. The thing is, a lot of them didn't have shoes on they had their bare feet and they weren't encouraged to wear shoes down there in the mud, so they didn't have any, so of course they used to like to try our shoes on, and we used to sometimes lose our shoes because they took them! They'd just take them off them. Because they were cuter than we were, don't forget, they had to be. But we used to run, running up and down the lines and getting in everybody's way and being told off. It was all fun though. Nobody ever got really bad about it, because the people there seemed to love the children because they all had children - all big families. If there was any swearing, I didn't hear it, or I didn't notice it. But my mother told me there wasn't an awful lot of swearing in those days in front of children. Not a lot. The odd word. Not all the time. Seemed to be able to keep that for the public house or somewhere else. But we really enjoyed. And then you see people fainted because the sun was so hot and the fumes were, the aroma from the hops between the rows used to be with the humidity, got so strong that some people would faint across the bin. And then of course there was always somebody there with the Red Cross on their arm and they called for them and they came along and they put sal volatile under their nose, the smelling salts. Always took smelling salts with you when you went. My gran used to say, "Get my smelling salts off the dressing table." to me. Because somebody was going to faint. I think it must have been getting in a closed area with the hops because they're about ten or twelve feet high I should think. And the men walked about on stilts. The people on the hop fields, when they tied the bines up, when they were getting long, they used to go along the rows on stilts and they were very apt at walking with these stilts. And we used to try these stilts on the edge of the field, try and get on them. And some of the boys, the Londoners, used to be ever so good at going on stilts. They used to climb up there and get on the stilts and they'd be walking along.

D: Were they the sort that you tie your feet into?

J: They didn't. They had a long pole that seemed to come up under their arms and the step for their feet was down step level. So really speaking they were holding the sticks with their arms and guiding themselves, sort of moving the stick with their hand as they walked along. It was a marvellous contraption really.

D: Did you have a go at the stilts?

J: Well I expect I did, but I don't suppose I got up on them really, because I suppose having six weeks there, you'd get used to them. But we had a go, fall down, cut our legs, all sorts of things. But if it rained very hard, which it does in the summer, sometimes it was a quagmire, going through there, because it was mud in the fields. But people didn't seem to mind. And then, once you were on that field, you did exactly what the overseer said. It was very regimented because otherwise they couldn't have controlled the crowd that was there. They used to have whistles, wooden whistles, and when they whistled a very, very long blast, that was down tools for lunch. Now in the morning about half past nine, you had a

break, and that was two short whistles, and they used to have your tea, get your tea out. In bottles mostly they were. Lemonade, they used to put hot tea in lemonade bottles, and then it had got quite cool but then it was warm. And then we'd used to take, collect lemonade on the way, bottles of lemonade to drink out of the bottle without a cup. And then lunchtime when the long blast went, everybody stopped. Even though I was young I remember, everybody stopped. Because if somebody went on picking, the people round them would tell them off. Because they were taking longer than they should have done. See it was a close-cut thing, it was piece work. So, if you were working over the clock you were doing something you shouldn't have done. So, everybody stopped immediately. And then they went into their little circles and some of them went back to the huts, if it was too far, they didn't go. But we sat down on the ground on a coat or something we'd taken and ate enormous piles of sandwiches. And we used to pick plums on the way down, or pick fruit on the way down. And of course, the wasps started coming as soon as the Victoria plums were eaten, then we were bitten by wasps. And then somebody would have a blue bag - they'd always got things with them - and you'd put the blue bag on it and run around with a blue leg. Wet them and then we'd have blue on our face. The whistle started shrilly again, a short blast, they all started immediately and some of them had dress watches - because there were no wrist watches in those days - but some of them would have a watch and know that the time was coming up, but the overseer always did that. And then they started again. They stopped in the field that we used to do, they stopped at four o'clock, because they started early at six o'clock in the morning. And they stopped at four, because some of them went back home by train, a special hop train, went back into London again to the dock area, in the docks, which is now, where there's a train running now, the ordinary train used to run there, Isle of Dogs. And some of them had to get back home.

D: Would they go back home of an evening?

E: Yes. Some of them would go back and come on the milk train of the morning, come down again.

D: How could they afford to do that?

E: Years and years ago it was only a penny for the hop train. And if you had a ticket to hop, do hopping, you had the ticket which you received by post and you showed that to them at the railway station. So, they got in for a penny. And the things they used to do was, if they went down for the season, whatever they went down for, they used to take their bed rolls down with them, mattresses because there were no, mattresses down there, and they just had a great big shed and they had to bring those - and they would hide the little ones in the mattress. Rolled up in the mattress, so that they didn't have to pay a halfpenny for the child. And sometimes if the child had chest complaints which invariably, they did and they hadn't seen a doctor because they couldn't afford to go to a doctor, they used to be ill when they got there. And then they used to get the farmer to get the doctor in, because once they're on their land, they were responsible for them. So, they'd get a free visit from the doctor, and some medicine because they were working for them. But they used to hide them in the mattresses, and pick up the roll, tell them to keep quiet, on the penalty of having a good hiding when they got there, so that they took at least one or two down there free. A very

happy time. We walked home about three miles, and yet when we got home, we had such a wonderful feeling that we'd had camaraderie in the daytime with the other children. And it was safe. You see apart from a cut leg, falling down on a stone or something, you couldn't get run over by anybody, so it was freedom for children, especially the ones from London they were down there for six weeks they did as they liked, and they were breathing fresh air in the country weren't they? And then in the evening I expect they all went back to the huts and I expect they sang songs. And the men smoked those pipes I suppose. They weren't allowed to smoke in the area of the fields in case they caught the string alight or somebody threw down something they could have caught the whole field; so, they weren't allowed to smoke there. The men used to wear long aprons, if there were men there. But mostly it was women, but some men if they would come down - some would be out of work and they'd all come down.

D: When did you do this?

J: I was born in twenty-four, so it was about early '30's; '31. I was there sometime when I was seven, because my sister was born in '31, that's why we came down to gran's because my mother had a baby and she sent us down to gran's, because it was our summer holiday and she couldn't take us out with a new born baby. So that's the time, early '30's. My gran lived in Maidstone, in Gladstone Road, and we used to go to Gravesend by bus and get another bus at Gravesend and go to Chatham, and change and get on the Maidstone bus, and we were always sick by the time we got to Bluebell Hill, and it's a strange thing, that Bluebell Hill always seems to be the place where my brother and I were sick, because we'd only come two miles from Maidstone going the other way and we'd be sick going up that hill. And the bus conductor would ring the bell and the bus driver would stop and if you had already been sick - I really think it was the fumes from the bus that used to get at you, as well as the thought that you were always sick. And he'd just get the bucket from the back, the conductor, with sawdust in it and go up with a long shovel and put it over and that was alright, that was okay, that was all done down when it got to the depot. And he would show us off with our mother to the grass verge. And wait. That bus waited until we felt well enough to get on that bus again. And later on, I used to think how wonderful that time wasn't always the essence was it? It was people that mattered. Nowadays if you had to get off because you were ill, you'd just have to get off and stay there, and that would be it, wouldn't it? But I always think what a humane thing that was for a conductor and driver to stop for a child. That's lovely isn't it.

D: Was your gran from Maidstone?

J: Yes. My mother and father both came from Maidstone.

D: You said you went hop picking for the day?

J: Yes, that fortnight it was a day out; but we used to go about three or four times in that fortnight. Because you see gran had all work to do and other things to do, but she thought it would be lovely, because it's something for us children to do. She wouldn't let us play in the road you see. What she would have to do was go and see an agent down the road, and there were agents everywhere that people knew about, no notices outside, everybody knew

that that was the hop picking agent. And she would walk down there, and he would ask her into the front room, and he had a book there and he entered her in. Because you couldn't get on the hop field without being entered in. Whether there was a reason for that I don't know, but the farmer knew who was on his land. But she always used to say, if you're going hop picking, I'll have to go down and see Mr whatever his name was before we went. But that's one thing that sticks in my mind and was a pleasure in our school holidays was when we went down to gran's and went hopping.

D: It was hard work?

J: Not for us it wasn't. My mother used to go down there sometimes to be with gran. Of course, gran wasn't well off - she was better off than the people going down there from London, obviously, but to have a few shillings more in a week in her pocket was something she could buy something with, a new hat, a new pair of shoes. And apart from that it was a day out for all of us.

D: How do you think people felt about the London kids?

J: Children like us didn't think any different of the London children because we didn't have any feelings about anybody the less than we had. It was different and we would go home and say, "Why haven't they got any shoes?" And my mother and father and gran would tell us why, "They're not as well off as you are. You must feel sorry that they haven't." But they knocked it out of us more than we knocked it out of them, don't forget; we got the worst of it. Because they had to look after themselves because they were poor, I mean that's how they got what they wanted, they had to fight for life, more than we fought for life.

D: Was that a shock to you, the first time you met the kids?

J: No, because my father was a very good father in that on his days off, if he was at home, if he was off on Saturday lunchtime, or on a Sunday, apart from having the garden and other things to do in the house, paint and decorate at different times, he used to take us all up to London on the tram, and the tram terminus was where we lived at Horns Cross, Stone, and so it turned round there; they put the pole round the other way and it went the other way, the old trams. And overhead wires and the rails. And we could go all the way up to New Cross and Deptford for tuppence weekends. So that was a shilling and nothing for the baby. A shilling to go up there and come back return. And we would bump our way up on this tram up the top most of the time, and if it rained we had a sheet we used to pull down, a rubber sheet that was fixed to the front, used to pull it down over our lap and round our neck, and didn't get wet upstairs. And the seats downstairs faced one way or the other; you only had to move the backs over, and you could sit the opposite way. We used to have fun in the tram. And when we got up there - he said later in life that the reason he took us up there was so that we could see how other people lived to appreciate what we had and not to take life for granted. And he worked for Evereads the Shipping People, so he had to go up there to the docks to the ships as they came in to get the papers signed. And as he was walking back through the docks, if he went into a shop to buy sweets, which he invariably did because he always came home with pocketful's of sweets, he'd often - the doors were usually open you know - sometimes they'll ask him for a cup of tea. And my mother used to

make up parcels and I used to wonder why he took them to work with him. And later on, I found he was taking our clothes when we grew out of them, taking them up and giving them to some people. So, we were educated into knowing how other people lived and what they didn't have and seeing them standing outside the public house drinking lemonade between perhaps five of them, and their parents were in there probably getting drunk. I suppose the reason they did that was that they had nothing else to do and they had sorrows and they had to bury them somehow. So, I think I had an educational part of my youth, and I'll never forget it. It was so colourful.

J: The hop picking part of it which was a part of the holiday season I always remember very vividly. And if I see any pictures of hop picking, I always look to see if there's any of us in them, to see if I can recognise them. You see they're put there for the day, they must be, otherwise their clothes would be dirtier than that, because if you're going to be six weeks away, your clothes weren't going to stay fresh clean, are they? So, I rather feel that some of these pictures - that family particularly - are down for the day. You never see a picture of hop pickers with miserable faces. And these I rather feel are workers in the war. I should think that's a war time hop picking, when the girls in the land army. It's the way the girls are dressed I should think. And these are the huts.

D: Did you go inside the huts at all?

J: I looked in there, because as children you went everywhere, and to me it was just curtains put round everywhere; curtains hung up at windows, bits of material, and the mattresses on the floor; that's what I saw. That was in the early '30's. But after that I think they did get beds. In 1938 things weren't so good, and I was at school studying and I was doing piano then, so I didn't go down to Gravesend, we were too busy, and for gran to have us when we were grown up was a different thing, because she had other grandchildren been born after us and she used to have them there. And then grandad died. So, we used to have them come up to us then for the holidays. So, it reversed. So, the hop picking stopped in that case.

D: What do you remember most strongly about the hop picking, is it smells or taste?

J: Smell, wasps, laughter, and aprons - being young if I was running, I would go right into an apron and probably get hold of it. So, all the ladies wore aprons, yes. I think the smell was the overriding thing as soon as you were at the hop field. And tea; some of them brewed it themselves over tiny stoves made of paraffin, and they would offer us one if we didn't have it and it was cold, which was rather lovely, and they didn't know us. And I think the taste - although it didn't taste like tea - was something very special, because it was different. If somebody else gave us a sandwich which gran hadn't made, it didn't matter what it was, that was something very special. And then gran would give them one. And I think this is like animals scratching one another. This is a sign of friendship isn't it? And that was the empathy of sharing things. So, as we shared our time and our games and our laughter and our jokes - and our stories, because all the people were telling stories to one another, all talking to one another. And probably, I used to think afterwards that a lot of those women got rid of some of the awful feelings and troubles they had by talking to somebody else who

was probably more enlightened. And they were probably helped over that. So if you share experiences you know very well that the person down there is not likely to meet you anymore, so you're telling them the utmost inner secrets, and you're probably getting something back; you're either getting that they've suffered that too and come through it, or they're telling you how not to do something or how to do something because they've had the experience. And some of the older people who've had the experience are telling the young girl who are about to get married or married or had children, what to do about little Johnny. And I think it was a whole hotchpotch of help in every way that today we don't get. Everybody seems to be a separate entity.

D: Do you think it was particularly special because it was mainly women down there?

J: Yes. I think there's a terrific lot of empathy with women when they get together all in the same area of living. You wouldn't get rich people down there, would you? And we were down there because we weren't rich. But we didn't mind earning a few shillings and it was a day out and our grandmother didn't mind us going down there; we weren't worried who was there, she wouldn't keep us from it. There was no class distinction as far as we were concerned at all. And with a lot of people there was. They thought hop pickers were terrible people. Because one or two things happened; a fight happened, or somebody was killed with a brawl because they'd been down the public house and had a drink and probably hit somebody harder than they thought they ought to. You're bound to get this, there's worse goes on today. There were lots of bad things about the old days, and a lot of things have improved for people. But in improving, one has to lose something, and the loss is always the something that affects the person personally, I feel.