

## Kit O'Connell Interview

P: I'm talking to?

K: Mrs. O'Connell.

P: Mrs. O'Connell...what's your first name?

K: Kit.

P: Kit, Kit O'Connell.

K: Yes.

P: Who lives at flat 3, Maybrook Court, 43 St. Gabriel's Close, Plumstead... So, yes, what do you remember about the first time you went hop picking?

K: When we got our letter from the farmer, saying that the hops are ready to be picked. Then we were off, my mum would go to the second-hand stall, and get all the second-hand clothes for us to wear, and we'd take the pots and the pans and all our clothes and bedding...lino, wallpaper, bag of flour to put the paper up when we got there.

P: Say a bit more about what you mean about bags of flour.

K: Well, um, the actual huts were all white... and it used to be horrible, if you didn't. So, my mum use to buy all these odd rolls of wallpaper. Didn't matter what pattern or whatever, and a bag of flour, any flour and we'd mix it up like a dough and put that on the wallpaper and it use to stick on the walls and hide the distemper, and plus it looked much better.

P: And you took the linos off the floors at home?

K: Yes.

P: To put on the floors of the huts.

K: Yes, that's it, and then we used to take it back home with us.

P: What was the business you were mentioning with second hand clothes? Why did you take second hand clothes?

K: Because we used to have so many old clothes, especially if it was raining, you had to keep changing yourself and things like that.

P: So, you need extras really?

K: Plus, we were already very poor so it didn't matter that they were second hand.

P: So, you took the pram down, and used that to carry the things or the baby?

K: No that was to carry our luggage.

P: How did you actually travel then?

K: We used to catch the 3 o'clock train from London Bridge.

P: 3 o'clock in the afternoon?

K: In the morning. They used to call it the hop pickers train. And there would be several 'cause like from all areas Stepney, Bermondsey, you know; nearly everybody went. There weren't many people who didn't go hop picking, where I lived.

P: And which station did you go from?

K: London Bridge.

P: How did you get there?

K: We used to walk.

P: With all the gear?

K: Yes, yes, 'cause we had no money, well you couldn't get on the trains in any case. And, um, 'cause we knew what farm we were going to cause my mum went to the same farm for twenty years.

P: How did she know she was going to be working there? Did the farmer write or...?

K: Yes, they used to send a card.

P: Saying how many people you could bring?

K: That's it. And if you were a good family, and you picked well, you worked well, he would have you each year. Plus, if there were any fellas out of work on the labour, they used to say to my mum, "Can we come hop picking with you?" my mum used to say, "Yes you can, but you've got to work". If you don't work you don't eat. Cause she used to end up with two or three chaps that were unemployed.

P: So, would you all travel down in the same compartment then?

K: Yes.

P: And how many would there be in the group?

K: Well, my own family.

P: How big was that?

K: Well, um, when we were going, we were all ages, 'cause you know some were getting married and they still went hop picking though. I think about 30 of us. Well, 1,2,3... we used to have about 5 huts.

P: All together?

K: Yes.

P: And you always went to the same farm?

K: Yeah, we did.

P: Where was that?

K: Wateringbury

P: So, did the train go all the way to Wateringbury?

K: Yes. And then we used to have about a 2 mile walk from Wateringbury up a big hill to the farm.

P: How old were you when you first went?

K: When I first went hop picking, well, I was born in January, so I should imagine I went there when I was about 6 months old.

P: January 19...

K: January 1919 I was born.

P: And you went at 6 months?

K: Yeah, and one of my brothers was practically born down there.

P: So, what would happen to you as a little baby then, while the parents were picking?

K: Well we'd go up the field with me mum in a pram, so the pram use to take all your luggage in. And then used to keep the babies in, in the huts. Instead of put them in the straw. But that was the early part, when I went the latter part, when I got married, I use to take my own bed and you know, and wardrobe and things like that. It was a little bit posher. Some use to take pianos.

P: You're kidding...?

K: Yes, we did. And calor gas cookers. At the latter end of hop picking.

P: A full size piano?

K: Yes!

P: They must have taken that on a lorry or something?

K: Yes, oh yes, we used to go by... See this was the early part.

P: Right, let's go back to the early part then. And then we'll come up to date. Now, in the early part, as a little girl say, if you were going picking, what would your day consist of?

K: Well it would consist of getting up at 6 o'clock in morning; lighting the fire, getting the water.

P: Where from?

K: From a tap, quite close to the hops. And then the faggot man use to come round with the faggots. So, you used to light the fire, get the pot boiling and then you'd have your breakfast.

P: Did the kids help with that?

K: All the children helped. You'd have to help, otherwise when the lolly man came around, you didn't get a lolly.

P: What sort of lollies were those?

K: Well he had all kinds of sweets, but we use to call him the lolly man.

P: Not frozen? Just sweets?

K: Just sweets.

P: So, what would breakfast consist of?

K: Well, we were lucky down hop picking, we were earning money so got food...porridge or toast and tea out the pot, you know out the enamel mugs, you didn't have posh cups and sauces. And then the bailiff would come round, like a foreman but you called him a bailiff, he would come round and call out your name and tell you what hop set you were going into. And your bin, the number of your bin, you all got a number on your bins. And then we would take up to the hop fields, with your kettle and your pot, and my mum would make up loads and loads of sandwiches or just a loaf of bread and cut it up there with onions and cheese and whatever.

P: Where did you buy that food?

K: There use to be a man come round early in the morning with hot bread and a chap with a van. But on the weekends, we use to go into Maidstone shopping.

P: So, your mum would make up sandwiches for the whole family, might the family get split up and sent to different fields?

K: No, no you were all in the one field, and you kept to that field.

P: So, your mother when you were a little girl would have kept an eye on you?

K: Oh yes, we were on the bin, we had to, they would have probably been my mum, and my eldest sister and to elder brothers on the bin.

P: Yes.

K: And then in the front of the farrow of hops, we each had a bucket or basket. We had to fill up so many, you know, before you got your sweetie again.

P: So, you were kept going then?

K: Yes, oh yes.

P: What if you felt naughty or tired or lazy, what would happen then?

K: Oh yeah, that was ok as long as you weren't pretending. 'Cause we knew that by picking my mum was going to get money and clear all her debts, and then we'd go home with new clothes and we'd have a good feed up of food and take a lot of food home with us.

P: Lots of fresh air, I suppose you must of looked a lot healthier?

K: Yes.

P: For lunch you had these sandwiches out in the field, did you have a proper break or...?

K: Oh Yes, the bailiff use to blow a whistle, and we use to have an hour break.

P: And the kids, would they be expected to pick all day or only for a little while?

K: Well sometimes you'd be allowed to have a little play, you know, but mostly you were picking.

P: And then, what time would you stop for the evening?

K: Erm, 6 o'clock – 7 o'clock.

P: And then would somebody then start the cooking?

K: Yeah, well normally myself and my sister was sent home early to get the dinner cooking. It was mostly stew or meat pudding, or you know, a big piece of bacon, so it would last a long time.

P: And would you boil that?

K: Yeah, boil it on this fire outside the hut.

P: What about vegetables, did you bother with vegetables?

K: Yes, yes.

P: And where would you get those?

K: Well normally the farmer was very good to my mum, he used to give us lots of vegetables, plus the country people in all were good to my mum.

P: Were they? Because of course, one hears of different stories about that, some people say that there was quite a lot of tension between the London hop pickers and the locals. But that wasn't your experience?

K: Not where I went.

P: Where was the place you went to?

K: Wateringbury.

P: Wateringbury, oh yes you said. And the farm was called what?

K: We went to Honey's farm, Philip's farm, cause all the farmers wanted us 'cause we were good workers you see. Honey's farm, English's farm. But that was all in Wateringbury area. Some farmers didn't have so long picking as others. So, when we finished at one farm, we used to move on to another farm.

P: You took all the gear from the hop to another?

K: Yes, and went to another hop.

P: Was that unusual? The extent to which you were decorating the huts?

K: Oh no, no the majority of people did that.

P: What made it worthwhile? How many weeks would you have been down there?

K: Well, years ago it use to be 5 to 6 weeks hop picking.

P: And when were those 5 weeks, when did it begin?

K: From... We always started hop picking on the 1<sup>st</sup> September. Don't matter whatever it was, it was always the 1<sup>st</sup> of September. And that would go right through to the middle of October or to the end.

P: So, during that time you weren't in school?

K: No, no. My mum was always...at school

P: But that must have been very common then?

K: Oh, it was. It was.

P: People just miss school then?

K: Just miss school, yeah.

P: And then when did school terms begin then in those days?

K: Same as now.

P: So, you'd miss 6 weeks of school to do it.

K: Well we missed more than that because we use to go in May, we use to go hop training first.

P: What's hop training?

K: Well when the hops begin to grow, there little... you have to twiddle them around the vines. Then we used to go fruit picking at Vincent's farm in Watlington. And then we used to go to another farm hop picking.

P: So, you really spent 3 months down there?

P & K: May, June, July, August, September.

P: 5 months really? Good heavens.

K: Yeah.

P: What happened to the house in London during this time?

K: Well, my dad used to be there and my older brothers.

P: They were at work?

K: Yes.

P: What part of London was that?

K: ...East end of London.

P: Right. And so, would a lot of your school friends been down in the hop fields with you?

K: Well yes, down the little street where I lived, the majority of people down my street went the same time and same farm. So, I mean, the early part we went by train, but the latter years my mum used to start collecting, when we came home from hop picking, she used to start collecting for the next year. And then we used to have a lorry so we could take better stuff to use. And you'd go down in comfort, straight to the hop huts.

P: Did you meet any sweethearts out there?

K: Oh yes, we all had boyfriends down hop picking.

P: What was that like in courting days? Did you go with people you knew or were you expected to meet nice young men?

K: Oh yes, yes. Farmers son, I was always hoping to be a farmer's wife.

P: Really?

K: Yes, yes.

P: Did they look forward to having a laugh with the girls?

K: Oh yes.

P: Were there social occasions where you could mix and meet?

K: Erm, well no, only when the farmer used to come round and see that you were all ok, I mean, where I went you had to keep your hut clean and all the surroundings. So, people who say hop picking was dirty, must have gone to a dirty farm.

P: Really, you were inspected?

K: We were, yes.

P: And what would have happened if a family came down to that farm and weren't that clean?

K: Well no, he would use his own judgement, if he thought they were going to be troublemakers, he would sort of give them a chance, but you know, you can tell really. And

if they wouldn't go out picking, and just using the hut as a holiday place, that's what a lot of them use to do.

P: So how many families apart from your own and you mentioned at one point they might at one point have been thirty people, how many others would be working at the same farm?

K: ... I should think about another 40 families.

P: Good heavens.

K: The row of huts where we were, I mean me mum and the family, took mostly the first row of huts. Then there was another row of huts, they were from Bermondsey. And then other the side there was a little common, there were a big family there from Stepney.

P: I had no idea it was on such a scale. Was this a particularly large hop farm?

K: Yes, yes.

P: And so, organising those huts, were those huts just there from year to year.

K: Yes.

P: And were they kind of, um.... Any damage repaired over the winter time or were they in good nick?

K: They used to put animals in them during the winter or stay the hay. But they were all cleaned out, ready for the hop pickers.

P: So, it was smelly or...?

K: Oh no, no, no.

P: What about creepy crawlies?

K: Oh yeah there was a lot of creepy crawlies, but my mum used to take sprays and things, you know.

P: What about in the evenings? You'd have a supper and light a fire. What would you do in the evenings?

K: Well I mean, the youngsters we'd probably sit round the fire and tell ghost stories and frighten the life out of each other. And some of the elders, if they could spare the money would go over to the pub, you know they would sing songs and whatever. Weekends were terrific.

P: What happened at weekends?

K: Well, where we were, there was um, an old lady from Bermondsey, she was a catholic lady and she used to have an Irish band come down there on her common, but that wasn't far from where we were. The same far but another common, and we used to go there.

P: What did they play?

K: All the Irish songs.

P: On fiddle?

K: Um no.

P: On a squeeze box?

K: Yes. Terrific... lovely people... rough and ready but great.

P: So, there was a lot of Irish people going picking?

K: Well she wasn't actually Irish, but she was catholic.

P: Catholic from the Bermondsey area? Because there was a big Catholic community there.

K: Oh, there is... Alice Sullivan, Bernie Bowen, Mrs. Hicks, Mrs. Pilot.

P: You remember them all?

K: Yeah, yeah, I remember lots of names.

P: So, every year when you came back again it'd be the same people?

K: Same people, yes.

P: Did you get friendly with people, say from a different area?

K: Yes, all different areas. Used to go visit them and soon as you got your hopping card, you use to go see if they got theirs. And you know, you'd all be going at the same time.

P: Do you remember any fights or any scandals or anything going terribly wrong?

K: Well yeah, they used to be some of the punch ups Saturday night, when some of them had got too boozed. Husbands and wives having a punch up, you know, but you never use to take any notice 'cause they'd hit you as well.

P: Did the husbands come down at weekends?

K: Yeah, those that were working in London.

P: They'd come down Saturday night and go to the pub?

K: Yeah, probably bring a lot of food down, you know, from London and whatever.

P: What sort of jobs were the men doing at that time?

K: Well, most of them were dockers. My husband was a docker, worked 33 years in the docks.

P: So, the husbands would come back and then they'd go again on the Sunday evening?

K: Yeah, or Monday morning early, if they got a hangover.

P: Does any particular incident strike you, maybe from when you were about 12...11...13 that sort of age?

K: Not really no.

P: Or from your married days going down there?

K: Well, I didn't go to the same place when I was married I went to Paddock Wood.

P: And what was that like?

K: Oh, that was a lovely place, they were big huts just like bungalows.

P: Oh really?

K: Yeah.

P: They sort of upgraded it all by then?

K: Oh yes, yes. By the time I got married. But because my two children weren't keen on hop picking, so I only went a couple of years. No, they didn't like it.

P: Why did they not like it?

K: They didn't like the picking.

P: Because it was hard work?

K: No, no, it makes your hands all black and they never used to like eating their food after they picked hops.

P: Does it make you smell?

K: Yeah, but I love the smell of hops.

P: And why did it go black?

K: The stuff they sprayed the hops with, gets on your fingers you see.

P: And had they used that same stuff to spray it when you were a child?

K: Oh yes, yeah. But my mum always used to keep all the old clothes and we'd take them up the fields and hold our sandwiches in them. If you were fussy but if you were hungry you weren't fussy you just ate.

P: Were you a bit disappointed when your children weren't so keen on it?

K: Yeah, yes. Plus, it was beginning to phase out, hand picking, that was when the machine picking came in.

P: When did that happen more or less?

K: Umm, oh a few years ago.

P: Was that immediately after the war?

K: Oh no, no, no. 'Cause I went after the war. I should think 10-15 years ago.

P: Really as recently as that?

K: But its only what people did themselves. 'Cause as I say, at the end of hop picking, younger people were going, and they were taking caravans and that down, and just using it as a holiday base, then they wouldn't go out and pick the hops. So, that's when they stopped the hop picking, like people going down and they got machines in.

P: When you got back to London as a child, you'd been hop picking, you'd missed 6 weeks of school, do you remember the other kids?

K: Oh yes, yes. 'Cause we were all brown and we had all new clothes, went to school in all new clothes. We used to take home great big hopping apples, 'cause we used to go scrumping in those days, I mean its dishonest, probably go pinch a chicken or two bring home, you know, bag of potatoes and cabbages and whatever.

P: As a kid, did you read, I mean, did people sit round the fire and read?

K: No, no, just talking, you know, people would tell their life's stories, you know, have a laugh.

P: And the people who took the piano, what happened there, did that go out in the yard?

K: No, that went under the cook house, 'cause Blest farm at Mereworth...

P: What farm?

K: Blest. B-L-E-S-T farm. 'cause after the war, I went up to these hop huts with a family from Bermondsey, and I stayed with them and went back to live with them until I got rehoused by the council. 'Cause I got bombed out, my mum and dad had both died down there in... hospital. And it was Alice Sullivan who had the piano, yeah one of her sons fetched it down on a lorry. I say, if you haven't been hop picking, you haven't lived. Well my brothers in Canada, and when he comes home, about every 2 years, that's the first place he goes to, down Kent.

P: That's great. Now what...

K: When I was at Paddock Wood... my family, they were all married and my brothers and sisters, they all loved hop picking, but they couldn't be bothered taking all the stuff down, so I was the only one who used to go hop picking, and I used to have 2 or 3 huts and they used to all have their holidays down there. But they'd come out picking, and my brother one day was cooking sausages on the fire, and he done one load and put them on the plate, came in the hopped to get the rest of the sausages, meanwhile, a dog, a loose dog had pinched all the sausages that he was cooking. And he was chasing them round the hop field and that. And one of my brothers got really drunk once and he fell in the cesspool and they left him there, no one would touch him.

P: I didn't ask you about arrangements on that front, did they have sort of a hole or what kind of lavatory?

K: No, it was a tin shed like, and just had a bar across, but they were always putting lime down there.

P: So, it wasn't overpoweringly horrible then?

K: No, what we used to do, we used to go to the woods, and you know, 'cause you can't be too careful after anybody.

P: So, what about washing arrangements, how did you do that? Did you bother heating water or did you just...?

K: No, um the farmer we went to, we used to have hot water. So, we were lucky really.

P: How did he do that?

K: well, he had a big boiler place.

P: Up near the sheds?

K: Yes. Only certain could you have it. Some people would abuse it, keep using the hot water.

P: Did you use that for washing up and stuff?

K: Oh yes, washing up and Friday night was bath night.

P: Oh, did you really have a bath out there?

K: Oh yes, we used to take a big tin bath.

P: And where would you do that? Would you do that in the sheds or in the open?

K: No, no. In your own hut. But one at a time, you'd go in the bath, shut the hut door.

P: You had your lino on the floor?

K: Yes.

P: Did you heat the huts at all or not?

K: Oh no, no. they weren't cold though.

P: And if you did have a cold spell would you take a paraffin stove down there.

K: Umm, no, my mum didn't. She couldn't afford a paraffin stove. Some did the latter years, as I said the latter years some people took calor gas cookers.

P: What sort of size were the hop huts then?

K: I should think half the size of this room.

P: For a family?

K: Mm.

P: So really there would be enough room for the beds and not much else really?

K: Well we used to have halfway for the beds and then the other half to eat your food and that.

P: Did you eat the food in the hut rather than outdoors then?

K: well if it was nice then we'd have a table outside.

P: So, you took a table and chairs?

K: Oh yes. We'd have table and chairs.

P: How did you manage that on the train?

K: Well, you see, this is how people were good to us down there. They had tables and chairs, they use to give them to my mum and then we'd leave them in the hopper, and lock it up each year, and the farmer used to keep the key. First time you went, you knew you'd go to that farm every year, what things you used, you use to leave there, you see, and then you'd just bring your bedding and that.

P: Was there ever a dance or anything?

K: Oh, in the village there was.

P: Did you ever go to that?

K: Well, when I was about 17 I did.

P: What was that like?

K: well not like London, but I used to enjoy barn dances and things like that.

P: What would you wear for that sort of thing?

K: Umm, just a skirt and blouse I think that's all.

P: And if you were going to a dance in London...

K: you'd get dressed up.

P: And where would that be?

K: When I was working in Whitefield's, I used to go to Stratford town hall. Used to wear a long satin dress then.

P: But you wouldn't wear that out of London?

K: Oh no, wouldn't take that down hop picking.

P: So, would you dance with the fellow hop pickers or would you dance with the locals?

K: Dance with whoever was there.

P: They'd have live bands?

K: No, records.

P: In the village halls?

K: yes, wind up.

P: Not a live band...

K: oh no.

P: And when would that be, just on a Saturday night?

K: Yeah, sometimes during the week. We used to have the salvation army down there. They were good, I used to like the salvation army.

P: The band?

K: Yeah, they used to come down. Oh, at Whitbread's Farm, Salvation army had a tent there for first aid.

P: Were there a lot of injuries then?

K: Well yeah, 'cause kid's do get into problems, don't they? Climbing and whatever.

P: Do you remember arguments over pay and that sort of thing?

K: Oh, no, no. See, if you were lucky and went to a good farm, you didn't have to go on strike. Just have to tell him we are working hard, and we don't think you're paying right, and he just use to settle it himself. But 'cause there were a lot of farms round the area that used to be on strike, especially with the... what we call didicoy and travellers they used to fight a lot. But on our farm he wouldn't allow the travellers.