AGE EXCHANGE

INTERVIEW WITH BILL AND EILEEN O'SULLIVAN

Mrs[L]: It started about the end of August and people would all be asking one another, "You got your letter yet?" Because they got their letter to say when they should start picking the hops usually about the end of August. "Have you got your letter? So and so's got her letter. We haven't got ours yet. It's quite exciting." And it wasn't until the last week in August the first week in September or the second week in September, that we'd all go up to London Bridge from this area.

Mr[M]: First of all in them days people didn't receive many letters. Because they were poor. And there was always this one time of year they'd come with all the brown ones. So they used to know, that the brown envelope was their hop picking letter. So of course that's how they used to get to see, "Have you got your letter? Have you got your brown envelope?"

L: The beginning, that was the exciting part, they was worried about if the were going to get their letter. Well then about the end of August they would all start buying their pots and different things and store them and they had a cart, home made cart on wheels.
M: They used to make a box, big box with two handles with one in the middle. And it was made by the people that were going. And it used to have a lift up lid on it. They used to pack everything inside that and lock it down, put a lock on it. And it had four wheels on it. Like the little shopping trolley, but much bigger. up to London Bridge with that.
L: And they used to push that up to London Bridge Station.
D: People would walk from around that docks area?
L&M: Yes.
L: And they had special trains. For the hop pickers and they were always very early in the morning, about 4 o'clock in the morning, be the hoppers' train.

D: So how did you get this big box on wheels on the train?

M: They had a guards van. Piled in the guards van. In them days everybody was helping everybody else, because we were all children with our mothers and fathers. There were

six in my family, three girls and three boys, so we all helped out, like granny next door and granny next to her. You'd help a granny to put her box in.

L: They'd put them all on the train and they'd go Paddock Wood, and you'd be met there by the farmer's wagon. He'd say, "You're going to Wheelers Farm?" You'd all get in your cart.
D: He'd shout it out?

W: People knew him, they went year after year. They knew it was like a family, they knew everybody from the year before, and they knew their wagon and they knew the driver and they would got to the wagon and get all their belongings on. And he would chop chop down to the farm.

D: A horse drawn wagon?

W: Oh yes.

M: Some of the wagons had three horses in front. Depending on
where you was going, in the hills to get up had three; some wagons had two - in a line.

D: Must have been heavily laden?

L: Oh yes! You see, each farm wagon would go with his hop pickers to his own farm and then he'd take - from Paddock Wood to where we would - sometimes the men would walk. The women and the children and the boxes would be put on the wagon, or if not the man or the husband would wheel the trolley to the farm.

D: So he'd be left pushing the trolley and the others would get a ride?

L: the hopping box they called it. And he'd take that to the farm and the children and granny and aunts and uncles all go on the wagon.

D: Did anyone have to get off and push to help the horses u the hill?

L: Not really. It wasn't all that hilly, where we went hop picking.

M: They were strong shire horses to pull. Them wagons had bid wheels. Sometimes you go down in Kent now and you see the wagons, big heavy drawn things. Hay wains.

L: And then he'd go to the farm and you'd know which hut you'd go to because you were there the following year.

D: Did anyone ever go down on spec that hadn't got their letter?

M: Not really.

L: Most it was people that had been the year before. If you wanted to go for the first time you'd write to the farmer beforehand. And then you'd wait until he'd replied, if there was a vacant, how many pickers he needed, and if he wanted more, you'd get a reply, or someone had died since the last time, they would go get a letter and they would be a new picker, and they would go and they'd have the huts that were left off. So you knew which hut you were going to because you'd been there the year before.
D: If you wasn't needed you wouldn't get a letter?

L: You wouldn't get a letter. If you didn't get no letter, there
was no point in going. So you waited for your letter so you'd
know that your place was booked. It was like a booking really. And when you arrived the farmer would come round with big bails of hay, straw.

M: And you would take down what you would call a duvet now. Open at one end. We used to have the same thing, like one of those big pillow cases, but it was sown up the top and sown down the side before we went.

L: It was like a mattress. And you'd fill that up with straw.

M: And you only had the one bed.

L: And it was clean straw, and you'd make it into a mattress and he'd come round with what they called faggots. Bundles of sticks. Five foot long. And you'd put them down and then you'd build it round then put your mattress on top and that would be your bed. the faggots would be a support, like you call a spring.
The you'd put your mattress on top and that would be your bed.
D: When you went hopping did you both go as children?
M: Yes.
L: I did.
M: My sisters and brothers went with me.

D: How old were you when you first went?
M: About, well below me there was Tony and Eileen, I must have been going until I was the age of 7.

L: I was a baby, because I can remember my mother she always told me stories that she was taking me to the shops in a pram and she got her hopping money in a purse and she gave it to me, because I was a baby in a pram, and I threw the purse out of the pram. And when she got to the shops she'd got no money. And somebody behind had picked it up - nobody had any money in those days - you waited until the end of the week and you subbed on the money you'd been earning the week before. So I must have been months old. I was born in December so I imagine I went in the following year.

M: They all used to take baby children. All wrapped up in shawls. And sitting in the train with them.
D: was it difficult having babies down there?

M: Fair amount of people had babies down there.

L: They'd take the push chair or the pram and they'd be asleep in the pram or they'd sleep in the bed next to the mother.

D: What about when you were working?

L: Babies at the side of you in the prams at the side of the bins where they were picking. As you moved along you'd move your baby along with you. Quite a healthy life.

M: It was very good. It was a good holiday for children. It was the only holiday that was available to us as children in these areas. They used to come from Bethnam Green, they used to come from all over the place to go hop picking. You'd meet people at London Bridge you'd never seen for a year, the year afterwards.

D: You didn't keep in touch with people from one year to the next?

M: No. There wasn't many letters in those days.

L: There was no telephone. So you didn't see people. Until the following year.

M: And you met them again when they opened their hut door and your hut door, you opened it and the same people would be there.

L: Unless you were like a local family and then you'd all know one another. But they all tended to go tto their own different parts of Kent. My mother and her family all went to Marden. So all the neighbours around all seemed to go to that area.

M: I went to Bodiam Castle. Robertsbridge. The hop field was up the road from there, we used to go to Bodiam station, our train used to go London Bridge, Clapham Junction. Hither Green and then
non-stop to Robertsbridge, and then from thee it used to go on from Bodiam drop a lot of people off at the junction because they used to do picking at the junction, hop fields, and then we used to go on from there.
L: The hop gardens round there were owned by Guiness.
D: That was the Hastings ones?
M: Yes.
L: Where my mother and father went, Paddock Wood, was Courage's Brewery owned all the fields there.

D: Did different types of hops grow in different areas?

M: We don't really know. We were hop pickers. Down and outs.

L: You didn't really know much about, you went to earn the money. My father would know, he was into all that.

D: Did you take the leaves off first?

M: Yes. Off the branch. You see the bine down there, and all the hops growing off the sides. You pull a branch off and then you take all the leaves off.
D: But that stems really prickly?
M: Yes but you get used to that.
D: Didn't you get cuts?
M: Some people do, some people don't. As children, all your job was to pick the hops,

put them in the bin and the measurer would come round and put them into the poke.

L: They would measure in bushel baskets. A bin would hold about nine bushel.

M: The big bin was a cross thing like that, at either end, and it was an enormous thing, about six foot long. It used to fold up. And underneath it was a thing that was fixed in such a way that when you pulled it apart it folded up. So you picked your hops into it. The mother or aunt or grandmother would be picking in the bin, and you would have an upturned umbrella. Or you'd have a bucket or you'd have a box. So you were further up the thing, pulled down the bines, sat on the floor, singing away, picking all the hops, take it back and put it in the bin.

D: Did you enjoy it as a child?

M: Oh yes. It was great. We used to go fishing for eels in the river of a nighttime. The only part about hop picking really was used to get very heavy dews. Like a wet mist of a nighttime. The area down there used to get covered in dew, putting on your wet clothes of a morning. Short trousers and you had to walk about, because we was up the fields about half past six seven o'clock.

L: To be quite honest, I didn't like hop picking. I never did. Bill came from a big family. Now I was an only daughter, and I think I was pampered, I didn't like the rough and tumble of it. I never did like it. I didn't like the feel on my hands, the roughness. I would rather stay in the hut and tidy the hut than go up to the fields.

D: Did you go with your parents?

L: Yes. Mother and father. My mother was from a big family, nine in her family.
They all went hop picking and they really had an old time of it. Going back to my mother's time, they went all the way on a horse and cart from Bermondsey, and it took them two and a half days to get there.

M: They'd ride on the cart with the pony.

L: And when they were going up hill, the children would have to get out and walk at the side of the cart.

D: Were the conditions down there where you stayed worse in those days?

L: Much worse. In the early days all you had your lighting was an oil lamp. But in later years they had electricity, so the huts were wired up.

D: were yours brick huts in Paddock Wood?

L: No. Wooden.

M: Galvanised iron. And when ti used to rain it used to rain, bang! That kept us awake at night. It was all part of it. I enjoyed it, I liked it.

L: You expected it to be like that.

D: So if you didn't like hop picking, what were the good bits for you?

L: Weekends when my father - he was working in the docks - he came down on the Friday night. And I used to wait for him to come down, and Saturday he'd take me for a walk and we'd go through the orchards to Marden village. But the weekdays I didn't enjoy one bit.

D: Did your mum let you stay in the hut?

L: When we were older I used to go back early.

M: No, they used to come round and make sure everybody in the family was picking. Make sure the hut was all locked up. The manager came round, and if you were there, he wanted to know why you were there and why you weren't up the field picking hops. They were very strict. You just imagine, the length of the fields, it's all hops all the way down what they call the drift. Used to have to go back with a cardboard box and pick up all the loose ones, before they would measure out your bin; you had to pick them all up and make sure it was tidy. No wasted hops.

D: What happened if you were ill and you were in your hut?

M: You had a nurse. Cod liver oil. You had the little wooden hut

called the nurses hut. And if there wasn't anyone very well they used to go down there.

Her main object was to get you back on the field, so she gave you castor oil or syrup of figs. That w

L: Mostly you'd get bee stings and things like that. I cane
remember a time, there were two little boys, and they were poisoned with the berries - deadly nightshade. And they died. And for years after people used to go back in Yalding into the church yard and they were buried there. They were there earning money and they couldn't afford to bring the children back. By the time they realised what was wrong with the children it was too late.

D: Was there many accidents?

M: Quite a few. In different ways and different means. One of the things was that luckily we never had no serious accidents.

L: the River Medway went near here we were, right behind the farm. And people would go swimming in the Medway. Occasionally you'd get a boy drowned. They were city but they'd come mostly from round the river Thames. And years ago boys always swam in the River Thames. You all used to swim in the River. And they'd go fishing, in the Medway.

M: We had the big hobnail boots and socks, and these short trousers. And when we used to go down we used to sneak away to go fishing because we used to get eels, they were like a snake. they were fascinating to get and they used to twist round your arm. You get about one boy standing there fishing, and you say, "Oh, got one, I've got one." Before you know where you are, everybody's behind you and the first one's in the water! And you've got boots and socks and trousers on, and sometimes it was cold. You had no chance. You don't see them happen but you hear of them happening. You know what's happened. Mould and grass is very slippery with those boots.

L: Mud mostly, or clay, in that area. There's always some one fell in the river.

M: That was the usual thing, fell in the river. That was how it happened. Because you'd be all down together and one boy would put his hook in with a piece of bread on the end, and then get one and as soon as he said he'd got one everybody would rush down

and in you'd go!

D: Did you ever manage to bring any eels home for tea?

M: No they used to cut them up and then cook them and eat them. The mothers then used to buy them from the markets round here. Everybody had eels.

D: Was the food better down there?

L: It was plentiful, you'd have the butcher come round in a van.
Mostly you could only boil food because you had a fire, so everything was boiled on the fire, camp f

M: It used to be like two wires down and that was a pole go
across, and then you hooked off one end and put your billy cans right across it and your big pots on it and put a wire back and then leave it swinging over the fire.

L: It was all nourishing fresh food. They would cook boiled bacon and buy a big lump of bacon. Salt beef. Stews. Everybody had stews. You could put roast potatoes in the embers and put them in and while you were cooking the potatoes would be cooking.

M: Some of the grandmothers when we used to go round on Sundays could really cook good food on those fires. Eileen's mother used to cook marvellous food.

E: My mother used to do a pot roast. You have a big pot - we've got one in the garden shed now - big iron pot. And they put their joint of meat in the pot, with fat - like deep fried - and they'd put that in the embers and slowly cook it and it would roast, and you'd put potatoes in it and they also would roast.

D: When would you do your cooking?

M: At the weekends. You weren't allowed to go back to the place
during the day.

L: We'd take sandwiches. Mostly bread and cheese. Corn beef.

M: And onions. That would be during the week, Monday to Friday.

L: Most people cooked in the evenings. Sausages, you'd have a big pan, and fried food, or you'd have stew and you'd put dumpling.

D: What time would you finish work?

M: Six o'clock.

D: So by the time you got back and cooked your food, it must have been quite late.

M: It was and then it was time for you to just walk away and have a chat with your mates and then it would be time to go to bed. Because you had to be up early in the morning for seven o'clock.

L: By half past nine most people were in bad anyway, it was dark then. September.

M: Not unless you had a torch.

L: By about nine to half past it was dark and most people went to bed.

D: Did people go up the pub?
L: Weekends.

M: Remember that people never had money and so therefore the pubs were there for the locals.

L: It'd be weekends, Saturday nights was always the rowdy nights.

M: You'd get all the old hop picking songs and all that kind of thing.

L; And the pub near our farm was called the White Hart. And they used to just have one bar for the hop pickers and they would take all the furniture out. And all you'd have in it was the wooden table and the wooden bench all the way round.

D: Why did they take it all out?

M: We were the scruffy lot.

L: They would have a fight or something, or over would go the beer. They wouldn't appreciate furniture. And I suppose they could get more people in. But all the furniture went out, you just had the wooden bench and the wooden tressel table all the way round.

M: Some pubs used to charge 6d on the glasses, and a shilling on the glass. So you

used to keep your glass all night long. So if you went in the pub and you wanted a drink, you'd have a pint glass to get a pint of beer, and they used to charge you a shilling extra, so when you took the glass back empty they'd give you a shilling.

D: What happened if you lost your glass?

L: You lost your shilling.

M: And some people were very good at that, at nicking glasses.

L; Some of the pubs wouldn't have gypsies, they'd ahev a big notice up. "No Travellers served here." So they weren't allowed to go.

D: How did you get on with the Travellers?

M: Not very well.

L: Where we were hop picking the farmer wouldn't have them on the farm.

M: Gypsies mainly picked fruit. They were out at the same time as the hops. They used to put all the decorated caravans inside the farm and put it right in the middle of where the orchards were.
And it'd stay there until they'd completely picked all that orchard, then they would move on to another one. And they used to move all round the Kent area like that, picking. There used to be thousands of farms down there. In Kent.

D: So the whole of Kent must have been full of East Enders?

M: Yes.

D: You said the Londoners didn't used to get on with the gypsies;
why?

M: Some did. But sometimes after a few pints there'd be an
argument and then that would start that.

L: You'd get a few men who'd had one too many pick up someone's
glass and say, "That's mine!" Fisticuffs.

M: The dockers in this area were a tough lot of people and the gypsies were too, so you had the two lots. "We're better than you lot." But after the years of going there you got used to all these kinds of people.

D: How did you get on with the locals?

L: They didn't mix very well; they didn't like the London people. We used to call them homedwellers. And they would pick on the farms but they would pick in their own little section. They didn't go in where the Londoners were. they would go down of a morning, and I could remember my mother saying, "Hurry up, the homedwellers are going." And you'd see them all going along with their prams. They were pretty poor. They used to have these prams like basinets and they'd go down about half past six just getting light and they would go down first.

M: The homedwellers used to grab all the big hops, so that when you went down it was all the little ones.

L: The farm managers also were local people, so they'd look after their own people and put them where the best hops were.

D: Did that cause bad feeling?

M: No.

L: They didn't want to really mix in with the Londoners. Pretty rough people compared with their way of life.

M: We was really rough in our old boots and pullovers.

L: They probably didn't see anybody in those days from one year to another so when the Londoners came down it was like coming
from another planet. Boisterous ways. Drinking.

M: All the homedwellers were church goers. Really village churches.

L; Used to have the Salvation Army come round, and give the
children magic lantern show. Slides.

M: We used to sit there glued to this little magic thing.

L: Like a big white sheet they'd put it in what they called the
cookhouse, so when the weather was bad everybody went into the cookhouse to make their food. And every so many huts had their own cookhouse. You shared it between so many huts. The sheet would go up in the cookhouse. And you would all sit round.

M: They used to have like a police man's torch behind it, used to shine the light through onto the screen.
D: Did they ever give you any sermons?
L: In their way they did.
M: It was like religion to them. But they were all nice people.
D: the same people every year?
M: They used to come from Hastings. Hastings wasn't very far from there. Because we used to have hop pickers come from Hastings. The Hastings people where we were at Bodiam, they used to come because their husbands were fishermen, where they didn't earn a lot of money, because fishermen them days their wives and children used to come down and do the hopping from Hastings. On one side of the common we used to have Hastings people, and all the London people. But they all mixed in together.

D: Did you go and see the sea?

M: No, it's too far. Not unless you knew somebody, like that had a car. It's about 11 or 12 miles. Our holiday in those days was one day a year to South end, on Easter or August Monday. My father used to work on the railway and used to come down to hop picking on his privileged ticket. We used to go on a privileged ticket. Privileged ticket took him and my mother. That was six of us. So four of us had to hide under the seats and two of them got paid. A couple of them got caught but not many. If they caught you they'd make you pay. The ticket jumper would come round and mark the tickets and then the kids used to come out from under the seats after he'd gone. You had to hide all the while the jumper was there.

L: When it stopped in one of the stations, the ticket inspector would get on.

M: And all the kids would disappear. It was like a telephone down the train. He'd jump in

number one carriage, and they'd know,
kids looking out the window, and get in number two now and somebody else would

say, and number three - because they were long trains.

L: And another thing, talking about money they used to have what
they called a sub. So if you earned two pound in the week, you could have 15 shillings sub, and that would be taken off your amount. So by the end of the hop picking season, some people never had no money to come. because they'd subbed it all.

D: Did your family manage to save much?

L: They weren't too bad. My mother wasn't too bad. My father was working up in London so we wasn't too bad. Some of them with the big families with the children would have no money to come at the end of the hopping.

M: My father used to come down on his railway ticket because he used to get half fare. So therefore every Friday night we would all be washed up, clean jerseys, we had ties sewed to our jerseys. So your jersey was there and your tie was hung under that part there, so when you put it on you had a shirt and tie all at the same time. It was just a little clip thing that was sewn on there. And then you were smart, wasn't you? Then we used to get these all cleaned on Friday night then we'd be down to the railway station by twelve o'clock and our fathers were coming down with our sweets from London. So we'd all be down there and wait for the train to come in, and we'd carry his cases up to the hop house hoping to get our sweets. that was the weekly treat going down to the station, because all the boys and girls used to go down there.

L: Some of the men used to have jobs on the farm. The pole pullers. But that was a yearly thing, they'd write beforehand for a pole pullers job.
D: Was that always the men; did you ever get any women?
L: Only the men. they'd go round.
M: A long hook and where the part up the top of the bines.
L: Nothing was wasted. If any part of the bine broke at the top the pole puller would go round and hook it down and drop it into your bin.

M: Nothing was wasted whatsoever. Every hop. Say you pulled the bine and half of it

was left on the wire, the pole puller came round with like a crook and he just pulled it up, cut it, and it'd fall down, then he'd give it to you, pick the rest of it. But you had to pick all the waste ones up all the way down.

L: And the pole puller would also load the pokes onto the wagons, as part of their jobs. And that was a yearly job, they'd write away for that.
M: Because they were big sacks, pokes. They used to fill them up they used to tie them up with cords, like what they used to call the ears, tie the ears up, lay it down, then when the old cart come along they'd just throw them up, stack the cart up right high and take them down the kiln for drying purposes.

D: Did any of the Londoners work in the kiln?

M: The local people. Because it was a yearly job for them, because they were drying all the hops that we picked in September throughout the year. Then they used to come up here to the hop exchange, because the brewery wanted so many hops, they'd have to go through the hop exchange and they would auctioneer them. You got so many pokes down Bodiam, so many pokes down Frimley, and so many pokes somewhere else ready for sale. Take them up and put them in warehouses at Crucifix Lane, leave them there - very long ones like long great big sausages, great big long bags. And they'd say, "Oh we want fifty." Then they used to get them out of there and take them away to convert it into beer. They were nearly all stacked in London Bridge, all the hop warehouses.

D: The pub on London Bridge Station is called the oast house.

L: All round the wharves were the warehouses where they used to store the hops. After they'd been kilned or dried, they were put into bigger sacks, longer sacks. And they were brought up to London and put in the warehouse at London Bridge.

L: You could smell that as you walked past.

M: Some of the hop warehouses are still there. And the hop exchange is still there. At London Bridge. In Southwark Street. The hops from all round the country all come to London on the train.

L: It's mostly Kent that the hops are grown in, and mostly they came up to London

Bridge and it's all round that area that they store them.

M: The Bricklayers Arms trains used to run along the other side. And on another train on the other side they would have a long wagon with all the pokes in. The LMS Railway carts used to go in there and pick them up and take them on to London Bridge.

L: We had all the breweries round here. Courages. That was at Tower Bridge. Whitbreads - so they were all round in this area.

D: So you went all the way down to Kent and then came back up the hop fields.

L: You'd see them come on the carts, horse and carts in those days.
M: Some of the things that were unloaded from the docks when they do the hops they have to pick them up by the ears rather than use hooks. Because once you got the air into the pokes it turned them if they were stood at the warehouse for a long time. So they might go bad. It's like keeping them airtight. These sacks were Hessian sacks.

Side Two:

L: They would go from the end of August and get the hut ready. My father would wallpaper it, and all the best bits of furniture would go down. Roll up the mats, they didn't have carpets in those days, just had coconut mats. And you'd have all your curtains all round the front of your hut door. Some people never had anything, they just went down with a couple of pots. And other people would go down with all their finery.

M; We'll show you one of the pots before you go, see how heavy it was for the old grandmother to pick up.

L: She'd start the singing off. She had a very good singing voice.

D: This is a photo of your father?

L: Yes. He was working in London in the docks and he would come down on Friday until Sunday morning, ready for work on Monday. But they only had a weeks holiday in those days, and he'd have his week's holiday down picking in September. So that's a booked holiday. A lot of people did that. It was the usual thing. It was hard work. But worth it. Enjoyable; they were all together, all singing, all talking. Like one big family. All the grandmas used to have their black hats on. Always wore something round their heads.

Because the bines would get a lot of green on.

D: How old were you when you stopped going?

L: Went there during the war. We were evacuated from Kent, because London had the heavy bombing, and we went of all places to Kent to avoid the bombs and we were virtually worse off because they were coming over Kent. The Battle of Britain was all fought over Kent. And we were there. The spitfires and that they were all fighting all round you.

D: Were you scared?

L; 16, 17 you didn't care really, you didn't realise the danger. "Oh there's another one coming down "Is that one of ours?" And you'd see the spitfires all going up to the German bombers and you'd see one come down. We had one spitfire came down on the farm, shot down, and everybody rushed. Of course it was in flames. I can remember everybody running to where the spitfire came down. But there was nothing to be down it was all just one big blaze. But when you're young you don't realise the dangers of war. But when you're older and your parents, they're more protective. It's excitement.

D: Did anyone have any romances down there?

L: Occasionally you'd get someone would meet each year and in between times they'd meet up somewhere in London. They used to call them, hopping chap; "She's got a hopping chap."

D: Any with the farmer's son?

L: No. He'd go round and just say good morning if you were lucky. But no romances. Maybe with the farm labourers. Not actually the farmer's son. Bit too up market.

D: Some of the local people must have looked forward to having a whole bunch of new people coming?

L: They did. In the later years they used to come up to London occasionally. Invite them back up. For a day, and they'd come up by train. It was never more than that.

D: No scandals went on with people?

L: No. I can't think of any. I suppose they did, human nature being what it is. Everybody more or less kept a close watch on everybody else.

D: All living that closely together, you couldn't get away with L: That's right. Sometimes if they'd be a bit too friendly with the measurer they'd say, "Oh look at her. She's only doing that for what she can get out of him." See if she can get an extra measure you know.

D: Did that work?

L: I think so. This is outside one of the hop huts. You'd put parafin oil in there. That's be in the hut. That would be glass on top.

D: Was it dangerous with all the straw around?

L: Maybe. You had the back half of the hut was for sleeping, and the front the living quarters. A table and you made a little dresser, and you hung your cups up. Line the shelves out with paper, paper the walls. Curtains. This is in later years.

M; This is one we used to have in actual use.

D: It's got foil round it.

L: To give you more light. You'd have the glass there.

M: Unscrew it. There's the wick. The parafin would go in there. Lift it up.

L: My father put that in to give more light. See here? That's my mother there with the bin. This particular farm they picked in bushel baskets. So when one was full you knew you'd picked a bushel of hops. When they had the bins in the early days, the measurer would go round and they'd measure all the bins. This particular farm had bushel baskets, so he'd just take the basket away and give you another one. Then he'd have a book and you'd put down. You'd do about 40 to 60 baskets a day. You only got depending on the size of the hops, eight baskets for a shilling. That's a lot of picking. That was when the hops were very good, the bigger the hops you need less to fill your basket. So it be eight bushels for a shilling. If the hops were bad they were very small. They'd be down to five a shilling.

D: Was there ever a blight when you didn't get any at all?

L: Some years it was worse than others, if they had a bad year. Six weeks was a good hopping. If it'd been a bad year it'd probably only be two weeks. But there'd always be some hops.

M: A very good year was six weeks, from about the last year of August to about the beginning of October. And we always used to get in trouble going back to school. because we used to play truant and the teacher used to be after us. You weren't supposed to go. When that happened, you went up to the teacher and mum would say, "We had to go hopping because we need the money." The teacher would say, "Don't do it no more." Then next year it'd be the same.

L: These are hop picking here again. They picked in the basket. You can see she's the ring leader can't you there? All the time.

D: How old was she when you stopped hop picking?

L: She was most upset they switched her over from hand picking to machines.

M: They were all down hearted.

L: She must have been nearly 70. And then one year they sent to say they didn't need them anymore, though they knew the previous year they were going over to machines. And then they wrote to say they didn't need them because the machines had been installed and that was the end. But even then they went down weekends. Someone phoned the other day to ask after my father, but he's dead now. It was a person who used to go hop picking with them, they still go down there, and the farmer's letting them use the hop huts. The wife works in the kilns, when the machines take the hops into the kiln they pick the leaves out because the machines pick the whole lot. So they have women to pick the leaves out and she goes down to do the leaves picking and she phoned up and said, "Oh come down and see us we still go down there." So we will.
D: It's become such a habit with people?

L: Oh yes. It was their life.

M: We used to talk about it all the year round, and we used to

look forward to going. We used to wait for the day to come to go to London bridge, although it was four o'clock and two o'clock in
the morning. We'd all queued up with our boxes all the way up to London Bridge station, waiting for the train to get onto the train. Might be there for two hours until the train came, because it was all steam trains then. So therefore they used to let us in and open the garage doors, the guard doors and put all the cases and boxes and everything in and when it was in the train would go.

L: In later years the people got cars and it was more like a holiday camp. They didn't cook out in the open. They had calor gas. So it became more like a caravan park.

D: Do you think it lost something?

L: Definitely. It lost something. People just went for a holiday then, they didn't go because they needed the money. It was a combined holiday.

D: Was it all because they were so hard up that that pulled people together?

L: Yes.

M: It didn't make a difference who you were; if you went from your hut to the next hut or the next hut, all the old people in there used to wear their black caps. A ll the mothers had clean pinnafores.

L: And they would do their washing, they would have a big bucket on the fire, and they'd put their washing in. And behind the huts they had clothes lines, and do all their washing. They used to fit it in even though they'd been picking all day. If you do it in the evening or get up early and do it in the morning, boil it, and you had just one tap, you'd take it and rinse it under the tap and then ring it out and hang it up.

M: You used to have one tap in the middle of the common, a communal one. And everybody used to go down at different times. And then of an evening the boys would go scrumping. And they would put the potatoes in the fire, in the ashes of the fire, and that was good for the tea. You had to mind your hand. Always had baked potato with margarine in them.

D: Didn't the farmer mind you scrumping apples?

L: Yes, he did mind!

M: We were right in the middle of apples, and conference pears were like that; six inches, eight inches.

L: They'd be out in the orchards with guns. Yes. They'd have a keeper patrolling the orchards. With a gun. I don't suppose they'd shoot you but that would be enough to frighten you. He'd probably shoot down to the ground. They definitely patrolled the orchards.

M: And they had a set of dogs with them by the side of them, and their old gun under their arm.

D: So nobody tried poaching or anything?

L: The gypsies would.

M: Jacky used to catch a rabbit. We used to have a man go from here didn't we, who had a fish shop in Bermondsey. Every weekend he used to come down with his horse and cart and bring all the kippers and haddocks all the way from London, and go to the hop
fields and sell them. He'd come down on his horse and cart, start of on Friday night, get down ther by Saturday morning, because he'd stop at a pub.

L: They all stopped halfway and going from here to Marden, they would stop at a pub called the Ball of Birchwood, and that was a stopping point. At Swanley, that would be half way, and they'd stop there. Course they'd have their money, coming home, they'd be drinking and singing; they came home in lorries as time went and progressed, and they became more affluent, and they'd come home and you'd see the lorries with chickens hanging off the back, where they'd bought them off the farm. Always brought a bunch of hops. Everyone did. Even though they'd been picking them for six weeks, they still came home with their hops, a big bunch of hops and the chickens and they'd stop at the Ball. The children used to run wild and the fathers and the mothers would be drinking. That was a landmark, everybody knew that. It's still there. It was like a meeting place. Then you came up the road through Wrotham Hill.

M: In them days when we were children, especially Saturday night in the pub, you knew faces. Had beautiful singers, some of the women. Beautiful voices they had.

L: And they had all their old hopping songs. When you go down hopping down in Kent. Traditional songs they used to sing, hop picking.

D: Did people make up new verses?

L: Rude bits went in. See old Mother Roley, so and so in a tent!

M: Bermondsey was an Irish area. You'd get down there in the pub
on a Saturday night and somebody would start to sing by themself, I'll take you home again Cathleen. Then there'd be somebody else do Danny Boy.

L: There was one hop picking song it was theirs, They say that hopping's lousy, I don't believe it's true, we just go down hopping to earn a bob or two. People would sing those when they were in the fields. you'd get one start and then you'd go right the way round. And they'd say come one, what about so and so? And then you'd get another. Sometimes there was a mouth organ. The hoppers bar was bare of furniture. They used to take the pictures off the wall as well. Everything. They didn't trust them.

D: Did the locals have a nickname for Londoners?

L: Townies, those Londoners.

D: Were there any punch ups between the homedwellers and the Lodoners?

L: Not really, they kept themselves to themselves. They were very quiet.

M: During them days when you go tp these village pubs we're talking about villages when they were villages, and there were only a few houses. So therefore they were a church goer, a religious people, and they were not the type that would go scrounging, like we would for apples and pears. They used to buy them from the farm, grew their own really. None of their children wore boots, they used to wear wellingtons. You could tell the homedwellers because they all wore wellingtons for the wet weather, but we never we always had hobnail boots. Some of the women wore boots, because it was for the mud when it rained, the ground was always wet. A lot of the women wore kind of

boots down at the fields.

L: And coarse aprons. You'd get stained from where you held the bines to pick, you'd get a black stain on whatever you were wearing.

M: Very difficult to get out, especially in clothes. Hop stain. You never got it out.
L: Like a dye, you never got it out really.
D: How long did it take to get rid of the stain on your hands? M: It was on there all the time, all the time your were hopping.
L: You could rub it, like you use a rubber. But you'd get back to your skin and you used to have that black stain there where you'd hold it.
M: It's take at least three weeks when you come home to get it all off.

D: So when you went back to the school it was a give away anyway.

L: I think it was a recognised thing that the children would go hopping. Parents went and the school accepted it.

M: You couldn't tell your teacher you hadn't been hop picking, because with a nun that would be a sin. "Where have you been Billy?" "Hopping miss." "Well you know you're not supposed to go don't you?" It didn't really bother us. Hop picking was a holiday so we looked forward to it. So you took the consequences when you come home. It was just prior to the war when I stopped, because I was 19 and didn't go then because I was at work. I got conscripted into the army.

L: You wouldn't have gone hop picking once you'd started work because you couldn't afford to, unless you had a week's holiday down there.

M: I had week's holidays down there but I didn't actually go for the full time. Nearly everybody went down there for week's holiday.

D: Must have been quite lonely for those left behind?

L: Quite a few places were empty, the markets, just deserted because everybody would go hop picking. The shops knew that trade was bad in that time but when they came home they made up for it because they had the money most of them. Then they would start paying for Christmas things. Christmas things were like a club, so they'd start

paying towards the end of September towards Christmas with their hop picking money.

M: So you knew you'd have a turkey or a belly of pork because it would take so much a week for it, and that's how they used to do it when they come home from hop picking.

D: One lady was saying she belonged to a shoe club.

L: You picked a number, say you got three or four, so the third week you'd get your shoe from the shop. And they had perm clubs.

M: It was all clubs then.

M: Oh yes, the homedwellers used to come round and ask us for the hob nail boots, did we have a spare pair; or spare pairs for long socks. Yes they used to come round because some of the women were beautiful knitters. My sister Eileen used to be a marvellous
knitter when she was a young girl, jerseys and cardigans. When we'd finished hop picking we couldn't get them in the box to fetch home because there was everything else, so we used to give
the homedwellers all the jerseys, and the socks and the boots, for their children, because they were as poor as us. I should imagine they were either living on rabbits or chickens for meat. There were butchers' shops down there but you couldn't afford it. In some of the little places the local shop keepers put their prices up, but not many. But you could always go up to the farmer and get milk straight from the cow, because they used to milk them up their farm, milk the cows up there. That was the only time we ever saw cows. Some kids, the first time they saw them they wondered what they were, like prehistoric animals. And that's how they were especially with children fresh going down there. We used to play football with the locals, and cricket. All sorts of games. The girls had their games of netball and all that kind of thing, or mixing with the boys.

D: Did you take pets down?

M: Yes, they all had their dogs down there. One of our dogs is buried down there, grandad's dog. Down there, people used to take dogs and the farmer used to put down a load of poison to kill rabbits from eating the crops; unfortunately the dogs were off the lead where the poison was put down and they would eat it. She was getting old, Sally.