

HOPPING DOWN IN KENT ²⁷

MEMORIES OF HOPPING IN THE TWENTIES AND THIRTIES

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My Gran is sitting at home in Bow, East London, when her friend Flo pushes the front door open.

"Are you there, Hannah?"

"Yes Flo, come in. You look pleased with yourself."

"Yes Hannah, I've just got my card from Marden, 'ave you got yours?"

"No not yet. The postman goes down your side of the road first then comes back up this side so I might get it later. I'm going down to Squibby's (the Butchers). I'll call in on the way back Hannah."

"Ta-ta Flo see you just now, I'll go and tell Alice."

Alice (my mua) living next door gets a shout over the wall from Hannah -

"Are you there Alice?"

"Wont be a minute Mum.....Right, what do you want?"

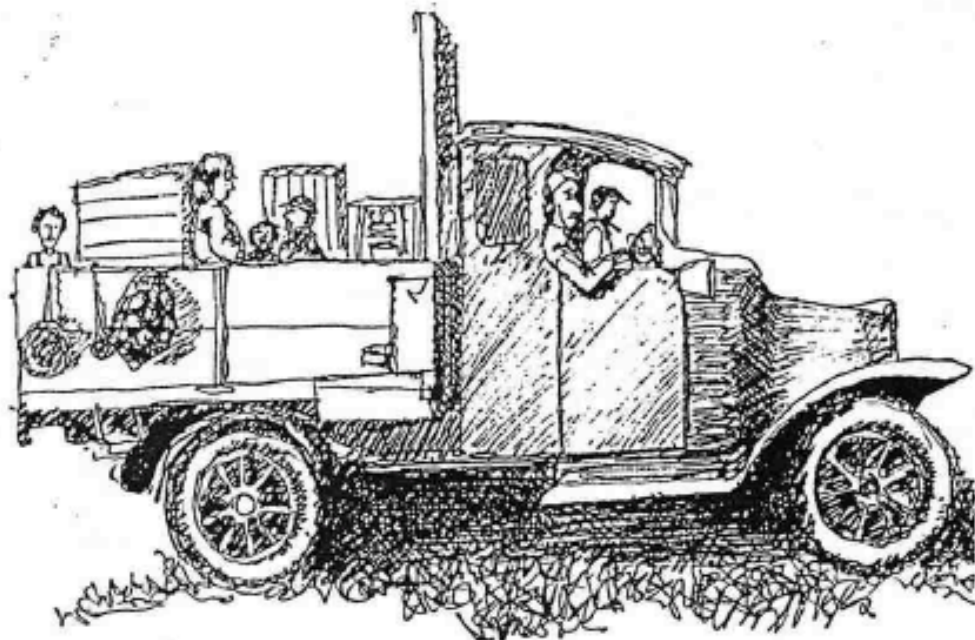
"Flo has just called. She's got her Hopping card, we might get ours shortly."

Sure enough, a shout comes from the door, "Postman!" A card gets thrown into the passage. Alice comes in. She's got hers as well.

The teapot is on, so when Flo gets back tea is brewed. We are in the same huts as last year, that means Flo is next to us again. Over a couple of cups of tea plans start to form. Are we going on the train or getting a lorry? The latter seems to be more popular as long as they don't get a lorry like they had last year when the bleeding thing struggled to get up Wrotham Hill - we had to get out 'arf way up to lighten the load and walk to the top, then 'arf way along Seven Mile Lane it broke down.

Alice is going to ask Joe (her old man and my dad) to have a word with his mate Harry who drives for Charlie Poulter. We start picking on a Monday, so we'll get away on Saturday morning. That will give us time in case we break down again. Hannah is going to have a word with a couple of her mates who may be going, to see if they want to share the lorry, it works out cheaper that way. Between now and then there's packing to be done. Us kids are sent to the Old Road Market to scrounge a few boxes from the Market Traders. Hannah decides that she's not gonna take the Jerry this year because after an evening at the Pig and Whistle it has to be emptied during the night, she's taking the old bucket in the yard. I'm glad, because as I sleep nearest the door I get the job of emptying it.

The day arrives, Harry has managed to get a lorry, it's an open one with a canvas cover added to it. He arrives about nine o'clock in the morning, by ten o'clock we are loaded. We call at the other houses to pick up their bits and pieces. "Ta-ta Lil, ta-ta Rose, see you in four or five weeks", Hannah tells her mates. We've got six adults on board and four kids. Dad's up the front with Harry.



Off we go making our way to the Blackwall Tunnel heading for the Garden of England - Kent. The lorry is limited to twenty miles per hour, so we're in for a good ride, our destination is Marden. I have to sit at the back of the lorry, not being a good traveller the porridge I had for breakfast could come up at any minute.

We are well on the way when the old man decides that his mouth is like the bottom of a bird cage. It is his way of telling us he is ready for a pint of Main Line. We stop at a pub just before Wrotham Hill. Harry tells us the stop will let the engine cool down before we climb the hill. When the grown-ups have got their drinks, us kids are treated to a bottle of cream soda between us and an arrowroot biscuit each.

There are a few other lorries outside the pub all on the same mission as us, the occupants all being in the pub. It isn't long before someone gets on the Joannah and we hear 'Nellie Dean' being murdered. Then we are told that 'It's a long way to Tipperary'. Eventually I hear 'Pinnigan's Ball'. I know then that the old man is on his fifth pint of Main Line. The Guv'nor of the pub is shouting his head off to get the customers out, but he's wasting his time, they won't go till they are ready. All he'll get is a bit of Dockland Verbal.

When they come out they make their way to the various lorries, some need a little assistance to get on board. As we are all going the same way we start off in convoy, six lorries all different in shapes and sizes. It is always a struggle up Wrotham Hill but once we make that, the rest is plain sailing. Turning into Seven Mile Lane you know you were in the Garden of England. Someone starts singing and it spreads along the convoy, the Old Hopping Song starts -

"When we go down Hopping, knock at number one,
There's Old Mother Riley, washing her big bum,
TEE-AY-O, TEE-AY-O, TEE-AY-EE-AY-O."

When we go down Hopping, knock at number two,
There's old Granny Fisher, washing her bloomers too,
TEE-AY-O, TEE-AY-O, TEE-AY-EE-AY-O."

This goes on until they run out of verses, some too crude to repeat, but all in good Cockney humour. A shout goes up from one of the lorries, we're turning off the next road on the left. Goodbyes are shouted and we wish them good picking. This happens till just two lorries are left, us and another one going to the same farm. We reach our destination, drive through the village, turn left before the Pig and Whistle, go down the lane a short distance and there are the huts we are going to spend the next few weeks in.



The huts are approximately ten feet deep, eight feet wide and six feet high - five of us are going to live and sleep in there. Although we left home earlier we don't arrive any earlier than last year because of the pub stop. The huts haven't been touched since we left last year - they are filthy. Cobwebs and various crawly things have made themselves at home. Granny is in charge, so she starts dishing out the orders. Us kids have to walk up the field to the standpipe with anything that will hold water. Alice is told to find the box with the scrubbing brushes and cleaning material.

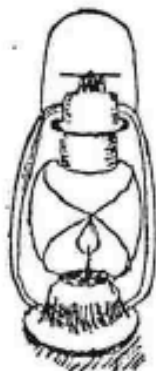
We are not the first to arrive so we are in luck. The fire is already going in the cook house which is an open ended corrugated shed, consisting of X-shaped iron tubes about six feet apart with another metal tube resting on the X-pieces with the fire underneath. 'S' pieces of rod are hung on to the cross piece and the pots were hung on them. This will be our only means of cooking for the next few weeks.

While us kids are doing our chores the women are busy in the hut, last year's wallpaper has got to come off - it's only held on by drawing pins so it's easy to take down. Eventually the hut has been passed by Gran as being ready for occupation, the next stop is making the bed. So once again us kids are detailed to fetch the faggots, which are bundles of twigs from trees tied together. The faggots are laid across the hut floor leaving a couple of foot at the end. The faggots are usually two or three deep, depending on their size. Satisfied about the height and length of the bed, next job is to fill the ticks with straw supplied of course by the farmer.

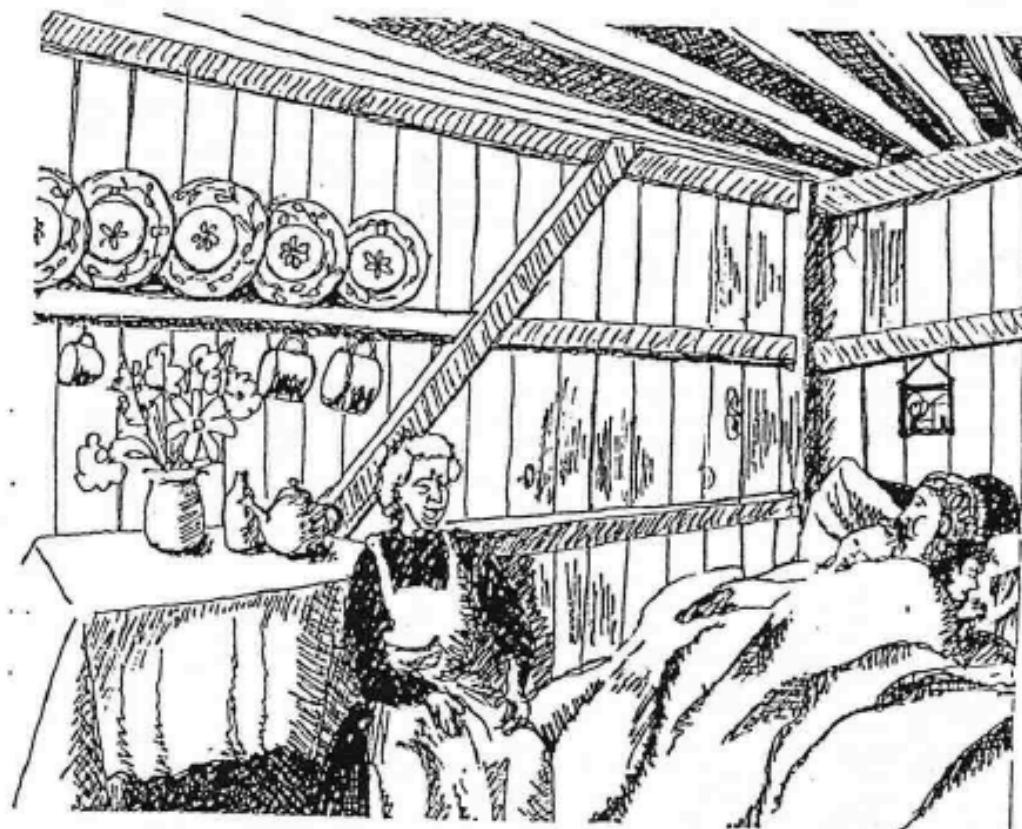
In the meantime the men have unloaded the lorry. Having been doing this for many years Granny soon has things organised to her satisfaction. She then goes to see if Flo needs any help. On the first day no cooking is done, so it's bread, cheese and pickles. Sitting around the fire having a chat with others who are sharing our cookhouse. I've got two pots of water boiling, one to make tea, the other for a sloosh (wash). We all use the same water to wash with which is in a big enamel bowl which has been to and from Hopping for years, it's well chipped but it holds water.

The men have gone to see if the Pig and Whistle is still there - that's their excuse. It's not the real name of the pub, that's what the Hoppers call it. They don't stop long. They're going home.

The ladies have had a good old natter, Gran decides she's had a long day and it's time for bed, that means all of us, you don't argue with Gran. We're told that we've all got to have a hit and miss before going to bed, otherwise the bucket gets filled. We go to bed in relays, Tom (my Grandad) goes first, then Gran, then Alice (my mum) then our Kid, then me. Last one in blows out the paraffin lamp which is our only means of lighting.



Everybody is twisting and turning trying to fit in with the straw mattress. It takes days to fit yourself in. Hannah has a chat with Flo before going to sleep - the walls of the huts are only boards so having a chat with people in the next hut is easily done.



"It's morning Joe" (that's me) "get up and light the fire." As I said before, you don't argue with Gran. Within ten minutes the fire is going, the pots are hanging over it for our morning tea and that's me finished for a while. By this time the women are about so they take over. It's boiled eggs with bread and margarine for breakfast. We have no chairs, you sit on the bed or one of the boxes the bits and pieces came in. The biggest box is covered with an oil cloth and that is our table.

Breakfast over, pots washed up and it's walk about time, to see who's here this year. "Come on Alice, lets get Flo and walk round the huts." The women go their way, us kids are left to do our thing. We meet some of the kids we made friends with over the years - there are also some fresh kids so there's bound to be a punch up or two before we go home. Ted and his brother Len are here - they live in Duckett Street not far from us back home. Ernie - he lives in Bethnal Green somewhere - Arthur, Sid and (someone I was pleased to see) their sister Ivy - they live in Limehouse. Ivy lets me catch her when we play Catch and Kiss.

We wander back to the cookhouse. The paper van has been round so one or two are sitting reading. Others are sitting about gossiping, we hear that two of the women have got souvenirs from last year, now about three months old. Come to think of it, I was born in May, so I am probably a Hopping baby.

Dinner time arrives, all we've got is mince with boiled potatoes and veg. Once picking has started, the baker comes round on Sunday morning, he'll take your meat and potatoes back to his bakehouse and bring it back later all roasted. I think he charges six pence for that. The vegetables are cooked over the fire. Dinner finished, the women decide to walk round the Hop fields. They want to see the size of the Hops so that when the farmer tells them how many bushells they've got to pick to earn a shilling, they'll know whether it's a fair deal or not.

Our Kid has gone with Mum so I go and find Sid and Arthur and we go into the woods to see where we are going to set our rabbit snares. We sell them for thrupence if we catch any, and get a clip round the ear if we are caught. One old lady, probably about forty but old to us, likes wood pigeon so we try to catch some of them as well. That'd bring thrupence in. Another way of making a penny is scruping. There is always someone making apple puddings, or baking apples in the fire.

Tea time arrives, its only a fish paste or jam sandwich. The Salvation Army walk round the huts to tell the women the times of their service and sing song, which the women look forward to every Sunday evening.

By now it's time for a few of them to visit the Pig and Whistle. The Guvnor is not too excited about seeing them but he likes the extra money, especially at the weekends when some of the men folk come for a couple of days. The only other shop in the area is the Post Office come General, sells almost everything you need including paraffin for your lamps.

Us kids are left to amuse ourselves. An old pack of cards is always one of the items taken down Hopping and of course a load of fag cards, so it's not long before a pontoon school is going. If you are not cheating or if your luck's out and you run out of fag cards you can buy some cards back if you've got a halfpenny. I've had instructions to put some taters in the fire for our supper - baked potatoes done in a wood fire are lovely, just like eating charcoal.

We hear the women coming back from the Pig and Whistle. They always come back in two's or three's, they don't like the country lanes at night. There are a few men here, they are probably on the R.O. or the dole, so they come Hopping to earn a few bob.

It's always gossip time around the fire when they come back from the pub. Gran decides it's bed time, so we take our turns getting into bed. We have another go at trying to fit ourselves into the straw mattress, hoping for a night's sleep.

Monday morning arrives, the pickers have got to meet the farmer at nine o'clock. Old George, he is the man between the pickers and the farmer, comes down to the huts and blows his whistle, this tells the pickers it's time to make their way to the kilns. The farmer is standing on one of his carts, he says hello to the old pickers and welcomes the new ones.

He tells the pickers he's going to pay a shilling for every six bushells, the majority of pickers seem happy about this, so it don't look as though he's going to have a strike on his hands to start with. The bigger the hops, the more bushells you've got to pick for your shilling.

He shows his pole pullers (the men usually do that job) where he wants the picking to start. Tom (Grandad) is our pole puller so his next job is to take us to the hops. We have to take a bin with us so one person at each end of the bin and off we go following Tom. The bins are placed in position with four bines in between each bin.



We're told by the farmer that picking starts at seven in the mornings, and finishes at five in the evening, with one hour for lunch and a ten minute break morning and afternoon. He also tells us kids the things we must not do, which include pinching his fruit and apples, catching his rabbits (as though we would!).

Tom's job as pole puller is to keep the bins supplied with hops to pick. He carries a long pole with a curved shape knife and a spike on the end. This allows him to cut the bines and the string at the top and bottom. The spike is then used to push the bines up to lift them and place them by the bin. He's got about eight bins to look after so he don't get much time to help with the picking.

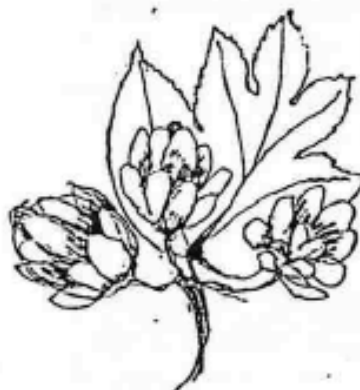
By the time the bins have been set, and Tom's given them all a start, half the morning has gone, so George blows his whistle for the first break. This normally consists of bread and dripping or jam. There are no washing facilities available in the field so you eat your sandwiches with the flavour of the hops you've been picking - Lovely!

Break over, now starts the serious side of the job - we get down to what we came for - picking hops. Us kids are told we've got to pick ten buckets each, then we'll get a penny to buy lollies with. The lolly man comes round in the morning just before the break, and if you haven't picked the ten buckets of hops you get no lollies. My favourites are strips of Sharps Creamy Toffee - we get four of those for a penny, so they last a long time. If we've only picked five buckets by the time the lolly van comes we only get a ha'penny.

Half an hour before the whistle goes for the dinner break, my job is to go back to the huts to get the fire going and the water boiled ready for their cuppa. I don't mind doing this because Ivy has to do the same for her mum, so sometimes the water is boiling, sometimes it isn't. Dinner break consists of a bowl of soup and a doorstep or a sandwich, our main meal will be in the evening.

Back to the field and picking goes on till Tom shouts, "Get your hops ready." This lets the pickers know that George, the measurer is on his way. The hops in the bin have got to be cleaned. This means turning them over and picking out the leaves. If old George thinks there are too many leaves among the hops, he'll make you do it again. Tom stands holding the Poke (sack). George measures the hops with his bushell basket, then tips them into the poke when full. Tom ties it up and it gets thrown on to the hop cart which would be standing close by. The amount of bushells is entered in the pay book and also on George's record. If you need a sub on your book the farmer will let you have a few bob, then knock it off at the end of the picking. If you get measured early you pick a few more to start the next day. If he is late or if you are last to be measured, one person has to wait behind while the others go back to the huts.

The evenings during the week are much the same. The days are devoted to serious hop picking. Us kids do our share. Before we tip our bucket of hops into the bin Gran inspects them making sure there are more hops than leaves. Picking hops and living under these conditions is a rough way of earning a few bob, but to us Eastenders it is a working holiday, the only one we get.



On Friday it is Ada's birthday, Hannah tells us that when it's break time Ada is going in the bin, and as soon as George blows his whistle that is the signal for Ada to be grabbed and put in the bin, then covered with hops. "Ada", says Hannah, "you've got no bleedin' drawers on!" She's only brought one pair with her, and they are drying out after being washed. Her old man is bringing some more at the weekend. The moral of this story, always wear knickers on your birthday. It's all taken in good fun and the chorus of 'Happy Birthday to You' breaks out.

It's Saturday tomorrow, and if the men have had any work during the week some will come down for the weekend. Dad is a crane driver in the docks - if a boat comes in he usually manages to get a few days work. Mum usually goes through hop picking without having to have a sub.

Picking finishes at twelve o'clock on Saturday morning. By this time the men are beginning to arrive, the women to change into their clean aprons. Dad arrives in his blue serge suit. He has managed to get four days in, so he gives Mum a few bob. Although Dad likes his pint of Main Line with his mates, he always gives Mum enough money to get by. Saturday night at the Pig and Whistle is variety night - anything can happen, from a punch up to a knees up. The adults are ready for their evening at the Pig and Whistle. Mum says, "Are you coming with us?" I say, "Not yet Mum, we are going to have a game of cards. But take Our Kid with you, he's too young to play cards".

I'm not going to tell her that us kids have arranged to play Doctors and Nurses when they've gone. It was good last year, should be better this year - we're a year older. We walk up to the Pig and Whistle later on, a little wiser to a couple of problems that Doctors and Nurses come up against. We've pretended that Ivy is having a baby.



By the time we reach the pub, the customers are in full song. Dad has an argument with one of the locals because Mum is sitting in his seat. I'm given a bottle of cream soda to share with Our Kid, and a bag of crisps each - that's to keep us quiet until closing time. On the way back to the huts Mum says, "I hope you didn't get into any mischief!" "No Mum, we just played cards in the cookhouse." Little white lies are told now and again to keep the peace.

Cheese sandwiches are dished out for supper, the conversation while eating these is the events of the evening at the Pig and Whistle. Bed time arrives. Because Dad has got to get in the bed tonight, me and Our Kid have to sleep with our heads at the foot of the bed to make a little extra room. The hit and miss routine is carried out, otherwise the bucket soon gets filled. Hannah shouts to Flo asking if she's asleep. They have their little chat. The old man has had a few so he's soon asleep. His plates of meat hum a bit but once we're asleep we don't notice it.

Morning arrives; "Joe, get up and get the fire going, then see if you can find any mushrooms." Dodging the cow pats we (me and our kid) find enough mushrooms for breakfast. By the time we get back the women are about and getting things organised. It's not long before the hooter of a van is blowing - this is the newspaper man. The men fetch their papers and settle down while the women clear up and wash the crocks. Us kids are told to top up the faggot stock, then we can go and play.

I get hold of Arthur and Sid, then we go into the woods to check our snares. We know that the farmer and his family go to the local church on Sunday morning, so he's not going to catch us. The Sunday papers have been read and swapped around between the families. The women have prepared the dinner for cooking later on.

Pig and Whistle time arrives, the men are away on the dot, the women follow later. I've got to make sure a good fire is going for when they get back. Us kids are left to amuse ourselves, and someone suggests we play Catch and Kiss. It seems a popular suggestion so we give it a go. I like this game because as I mentioned before, Ivy lets me catch her.

Game over, we attend to the various chores given us before they went to the pub. Filling Hopping pots with water, fetching faggots and anything else they have thought of, these have to be done before they get back or we're in trouble. Dinners during the week are just normal, but Sunday we really stuff ourselves. Dinner over, Tom, Hannah and Flo sit in the cookhouse for a gossip. Mum says that her and Dad are going to have a lie down and don't want disturbing so, thinking they must both be tired, I take Our Kid for a walk across the fields and round the lanes. We pick up some wood nuts and blackberries.

The afternoon passes, and when we get back Hannah has got the water boiling for tea. I'm told to knock on the hut door to let Mum know that a cuppa is waiting. Dad's expecting a boat in on Monday so he's going home early evening, hoping to get a few days work.

For the pickers the highlight of the week arrives, it's the Salvation Army. Their Sunday evening open air services are very popular and have a good crowd around them. A good old Sally sing song does wonders - if we ask Mum for a ha'penny or penny she hasn't got one, but she can always find one for the Sally.

Sunday evening is fairly quiet - no Pig and Whistle, just a chat round the cookhouse fire and early to bed ready for Monday morning picking. The weeks go by in much the same way, working hard during the week and playing hard at the weekend. Cold tea and cold toast in the fields, hot meals in the evening.

Two fields have been picked, we're in the third one with about one week's picking left. Talk of going home has now begun. Joe (my Dad) has been told to warn Harry so that he gets the lorry organised, we will finish in the field on Thursday. What hops are left will be finished by the home pickers - the locals. Pay out will be on the Friday, and we will leave on Sunday.

The evenings round the fire take on a different atmosphere. Some are glad it's coming to an end; others would like another week or two. The tally books come out and those that can, start working out how much they've got to come. Those that can't, have to seek help from others.

Only Tom and the other pole pullers get paid a wage. The rest depend on how many bushells have been picked and how much they have subbed. The last few days of picking seem to encourage more hops to be picked to get as many in the tally book before it comes to the end. Thursday being the last day of picking, it goes on a bit longer because old George takes longer to do his measuring - he has to empty every bin. As the bins are emptied the pickers have to return their bin to the farn. Tom (Grandad) has to clear up the empty bines and then return his pole. Picking finishes and it's back to the huts. Same old routine, a different atmosphere.

Friday morning all at the farn for the pay out, the women have got their clean pinnies on and their pay books in hand. Some of the women have words with the farmer because their figures don't tie up with his, others are quite happy and return to the huts with smiles on their faces. Glad to have a few bob in their pockets. I am sent to the farm with our order for rabbits, chickens (probably old hens) and hopping apples. I know where there are some plum trees so we get a bag of them ready to take home, and any other fruit we can get hold of.



Joe has got Harry organised for Saturday. In the evening the women have a few Guinness in the Pig and Whistle. Friday evenings the Sally visit the pub, so after selling a few Old Soldiers and War Cries there is a sing-song which always includes the 'Old Rugged Cross'. Us kids stay at the huts, it's our last chance for one of our games - it's probably Mums and Dads tonight. One or two of them arrive back at the huts from the Pig and Whistle a little tipsy, so some of the hopping money will finish in the bucket, but who cares? They've worked hard for a few weeks so they have earned it.

Saturday morning arrives so packing starts. Everything not needed for the day is stowed in various boxes, the main box which is also our table is left to last. Joe and Harry are supposed to arrive about one o'clock, but it's nearly three when they arrive. Alice wants to know why they're late, she's had dinner ready. The reply is that they left late and just managed to get to the Pig and Whistle before closing time. Alice says they are bleedin' liars, and she's probably right.

After they've been fed and before they fall asleep, the lorry is loaded with what's been packed and anything that doesn't need packing. This saves time in the morning. Most of the pickers are going home on Sunday so the place is a hive of activity. It's the last night in the Pig and Whistle so it's going to be 'Variety Night.' The Guv'nor will rub his hands together but will also be glad to see the back of them and get back to normal. They arrive back singing their heads off so they've enjoyed themselves. Us kids have had our farewell night so hopping is finishing with memories. We go through the Hit and Miss routine and the bed re-shuffle, heads to feet. Harry is sleeping in his lorry.

Morning arrives, it's a quick breakfast and finish packing. While this is going on us kids are sent to pick up the order we took so we come back with three rabbits, three fowls and three pillow cases full of hopping apples. We've also got a half bine of hops to take home (we didn't tell the farmer) to display in the bars of the pubs at home. We seem to be ready for leaving. All that is left are the goodbyes. A tour around the huts is taken to do this job, I see Ivy and tell her I will be seeing her when I visit my aunt who lives near her in Limehouse.

Goodbyes finished we get on the way. It won't take as long to get home as it took to get here, Joe and Harry will want to get home before closing time. Now that hopping's over everyone can't get home soon enough, so there's no stopping unless its for a hit and miss. We're going through the tunnel so home is not far away. On arrival, Flo is dropped off first, we are last. The men soon disappear when they've unloaded. Alice tells Joe to get a Guinness in for her, she'll be there as soon as she can.

Things are back to normal. Me and our kid will start back to school with short back and sides. If the hopping money runs to it we'll get a new pair of boots. We are now looking forward to next year's Hopping.