

Hop Picking in Bexley

Hopping down in Kent, was, for over 200 years, an outstanding social occasion unique in all England.

The area covered a few hundred acres and tens of thousands of some of the poorest people in the country, especially from London, flocked into the Kentish countryside. They arrived two or three days before picking commenced, usually in early September, and stayed about four weeks before returning home and little was thought about them until the same time the following year.

On the arrival into Kent of these noisy, and often smelly, multitudes, the local people took many precautions to protect their belongings from theft and themselves from contamination. Shopkeepers put their wares behind chicken-wire and the baker often boarded-up the lower half of his shop door to prevent entrance and stocked all bread etc. towards the back of the shop so that it was out of reach of the long, hooked sticks that 'Hoppes' used to 'purloin' a loaf of bread.

'Hopping' was hard work, and very tiring and 'Hoppes' were frequently stung or bitten by insects, scratched by bines, often were wet through, cold, hot and sore, and yet they still said, "Ah, but they were good times".

It would be difficult to claim that Bexley was never an important hopping area. There is record of hop growing in Footscray and Crayford in the 17th century but by 1835 there was only 3 acres of hops in Bexley and 5 in Crayford.

During the First World War hop pickers were at work at Vinson's Farm, Days Lane, Sidcup and contemporary photographs show women, children and men in uniform picking hops into various receptacles.

Part of the 'Hop Supper' quoted in the Kentish Garland 1881

'Around the brown board at the farmer's we met, Where plenty of all we could wish for was set; His hops were all picked, and of corn his barns full, Man and wife are all jolly, t'was a sin to be dull'.

The Jovial Man of Kent

[N.b. the Sixteenth-Century Air, 'Joan's Ale is New']

"Away with all Wine-drinkers,
And such new fangled thinkers,
And may they still be shrinkers
From all good men and true"
Thus said the Jovial Man of Kent, As through his golden hops he went,
With sturdy limbs and brow unbent,
When Autumn's sky was blue,
When Autumn's sky was blue above,
When Autumn's sky was blue.
The hop that swings so lightly, The hop that glows so brightly, Will
sure be honour'd rightly
By all good men and true,
Let Frenchmen boast their staggering vine, Which gives them
draughts of meagre wine; It cannot match this plant of mine,
When Autumn's sky is blue,
When Autumn's sky is blue above,
When Autumn's sky is blue.
When winter snows are falling, And winter winds are brawling,
For nut-brown ale are calling
All honest men and true,
And when the merry song is sung, And logs upon the fire are flung,
They think upon the hop that swung,
When Autumn skies were blue,
When Autumn's skies were blue above,
When Autumn's skies were blue.