

Title: Carless, Mervyn_Interview_Complete_1
Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith
Project: Herefordshire Life Through A Lens
Tagline: Films, stories and exhibitions inspired
by the photographic archive of the Derek
Evans Studio 1950s-80s
Subject: Autobiography, Hop Farming and Hop
Picking in Herefordshire, Heritage
Publisher: Catcher Media Social CIC
Tags: Hops, Derek Evans, oral history,
heritage, PV, participatory film-making,
community film, Herefordshire, Hop
picking, agriculture, craft brewing, hop
wire contractor, wire-work

Identifier: Carless, Mervyn_Interview_Complete_1
Interview Date: July_31_2017
Location: Brook House Farm, Avenbury,
Herefordshire, UK
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee: Mervyn Carless (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
Language: English

Type: Video
Video Format: MPEG-4
Bit rate: 30.2 mbits/s
Frame rate: 25 FPS
Aspect ratio: 16:9
Width: 1920 pixels
Height: 1080 pixels
Scan type: Progressive
Audio Format: AAC
Audio Sampling rate: 48000 Hz
Audio Bit rate: 192 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 7.21 GB
Duration: 34 mins 12 secs

Type: Audio
Audio Format: MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 256 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Stereo
File Size: 66.3 MB

Duration:

34 min 12 seconds

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Transcript:

My name is Mervyn Carless, I'm a hop wirework contractor. We're at Brook House Farm which is Bromyard, Avenbury just out of Bromyard, and they're just setting up a new hop industry. It was a hop farm 25 years ago maybe, but all the wirework was taken down due to the fact that they had problems with the wilt and the industry at that time was probably on the decline. So that's it. It's a lovely spot. There used to be hops right through this valley right through to Bishops Frome, on down to Dormington, Mordiford, with hops on almost every farm. And the Frome valley is as good as the Teme valley we like to think as a hop growing area. But I'm a contractor who works in the Teme Valley, the Frome Valley, on probably on 80 percent of the farms that still grow hops, I think I'm involved with either hop sampling or wire work. And that's my story I suppose.

The wire work, as you see, a lot of people say to me, oh you string the hops, which is a classic, but the stringing is the one thing that I don't do. I build the framework which is here. As you see most of the framework these days is something region of 16 feet high, all the work we do out of tractors and loaders. In the olden days, they used to use stilts or ladders tor frames to get up. And in the forties and the fifties, most wire work was evolved from canes and poles like runner beans. That's how hops were grown originally in the 1800s before the wire was taken on. But nowadays, most of this here is 16 feet high, the rows are eight to nine feet apart – sorry it's not metric, that's the way it's always been! So that's basically it. The wirework has evolved over the years. We've obviously got dwarf hops which are grown on – we don't call them dwarf hops because the Germans don't like it – they are grown on low trellis which involves a machine that drives over the top of the wire work. It is a very complex machine which is ...I mean it's a very good tool but the yield per acre is not as good as the tall wire work. And at the moment the varieties, shall we say the brewers still want a lot of the old traditional varieties as well as the new microbreweries is a breath of fresh air. As everyone knows, we are right in vogue a little bit better than wine! We have highs and lows in the hop industry. It's like the waves of the sea, we're in vogue for a while and then the world market comes up and there's too many. I suppose the onset of modernisation and pelleting they can keep things longer. Whereas going back 25/30

years ago, hops were a green crop. Because they were a green crop the brewers bought so many pockets and at the end of the season they were no good basically so they had to throw away last years with this years. So that's basically what I do and where I come from.

Obviously, my parents were very involved in hop picking and my father was a wirework erector long before me. And he sort of started when times really were quite hard because every hole was dug by hand, they used ladders or stilts and in the winter, it was daunting, a muddy and mucky job. Obviously with modern equipment, we get on a lot better in the winter. But my first memory is of a farm not very far from Newtown, which is where I was born. When I actually grew up hop picking machines were just coming in in the 60s, so my memories are not quite as good as my father's but I've heard lots of tales about how many people were in Bishops Frome and the surrounding areas. An immense amount of people. You've got the travelling fraternity, you've got people coming from south wales, from Merthyr, you've got people from Birmingham, and they sort of treated it as a working holiday. It was incredible. There were so many people in the villages, the pubs were full. My local public house was about a quarter of a mile from home and there they used to have a like village hut and because there were so many people they would fill and old tin bath full of beer and everybody would bring their own jam jar or jug or whatever and they would scoop their beer out of the bath and go and pay at the trap hole and they'd sit all around the crossroads at Newtown and it must have been a sight to behold. And Bishops Frome on a Sunday morning, and a Saturday night obviously, was a bit hectic to say the least. I still don't drink in Bishops Frome because I've got this theory that you don't go there during hop picking, but that's another story.

There was a lot of wheeling and dealing going on and that was going on and obviously selling horses and they'd trot them up and down at the village there, at Bishops Frome and that was going on in maybe 20 or 30 villages around here, around Tarrington, all around the Frome valley. I mean people always say Christmas time was the busiest time but with the hops it was always September it kept the landlords for the rest of the winter because there were so many people. They used to have a whale of a time. There were so many camp fires. As I say there are so many families that are integrated now into Herefordshire life that we're either gypsy, Birmingham people, or Welsh people, and of course I've picked hops with people from Gloucester, who'd come out. Most of the men used to dump the women when they came to pick by hand and then come back at the weekend. It was a tremendous atmosphere. Every public house in the county was abuzz with hop pickers. On a Saturday night as you can imagine in the winter the villages were dead, empty. And then all of a sudden for one month there is an absolute, like a factory starting up, the buzz was incredible.

I couldn't possibly say about romances! I've got an aunty who married a Welshman, an uncle who married someone from Birmingham. They were all sort of interwoven, oh surely. Oh, there was a lot of that for sure there was a lot of romances going on. As you can imagine when you work with people for a month and you get to know people, and you get this comradery, and you get youngsters looking for something to do and they had a good time, as you say.

My first childhood memory would be with my mother picking hops on a farm just below where we live at Monksbury Court, where they used to pick into the old cribs and I can just remember, well as a child you were supposed to help pick, but us boys used to run around and jump in the crib. It was all good fun. But as I say it was very very hectic. I mean there was men, women, children all over the place. The women would light the fire at lunchtime, and they would all have their separate little fire and cook. Marvellous sight really. And that was my first memory and then when I was maybe 5 or 7, my father used to help with the hop drying at Monksbury Court and I can remember going down there and hanging off the bagger, the machine that pockets the hop, or bales the hops in these days, and they were a sort of a manual press and of course the man doing the bagging had to press on the handle and I used to swing on the back of the handle with my father and pretend I was the man doing the bagging. And then, as I say, I was actually shipped off to Birmingham so obviously my mother and father could work, because it was long hours, I was shipped off to relations in Birmingham when was in my early teens because I was a bit of a nuisance then obviously and I was everywhere and obviously with the hop picking machine, as you've seen, there's a lot of dangerous machinery, where young children are not sort of allowed so I had a spell when that was my holiday. My mother used to work on the new machines, she'd be picking leaves out or spreading out on the rollers as they called it, spreading the hops as they went through, and father was always either in the kiln or working in the field. I don't know if you know Morrison's at the bottom of Malvern link? All of that where the industrial estate is, was all hop. And I felt quite old actually, I walked into the shop to buy these tools and there were these young electricians buying cable and I explained to them that where they was stood was all hop fields that I had sort of built 30 years previously. I didn't know whether to feel sad or glad,

And then I suppose my first job, because father had a couple of small tractors, and he sent me out to a local farm to drive tractor. Well not being a machinery man I didn't spend too long driving the tractor I ended up helping the men in the crow's nest or in the loader, and the trailer, loading the hops. Which again was a marvellous time because they were all people from Birmingham, they were all families, usually all one family, and then you might get two, and there might be conflict. Everybody was working harder than the other person so ...I did about four or

five years in the field. Maybe and then I thought I had better get an indoor job so I helped the drier then, and I did the bagging and the booking. I used to book out the pockets and I used to just dry the bagger basically and I did that until I got married and then after that my father he worked on a big farm at Malvern that did a thousand pockets and he used to pick hops, he used love it. He used to pick hops for three months of the year. He'd start in August and end in October. I sort of graduated to working with him for a week in Malvern and then I would do my four weeks in the kilns locally and then I would go back the last week to help them out at Malvern when everyone was tired. Usual story. The casual labour would turn up for the first week and then they wouldn't pay them then on the Friday because then they wouldn't work on the Saturday because they would all go and spend their money in the pub. So, they decided then that they had better pay them on a Saturday afternoon.

I started obviously with my father with the wire work. We obviously got tractors that we sort of rented out for hop hauling and they're probably still the best tractors for hop hauling now. So that's sort of how I started with the picking and obviously with my father, hop picking was all part of our year, runs from hop picking to hop picking year as regards work. The actual wire work, as soon as the hops are off then the farmer can see if he has any broken poles, or wires broken or any repairs done. And then the wire work obviously has to be done between hops that are existing, we've got to be finished by March, so September to March is the major repairs and that is done through the winter, and as I say, we probably go to 80 percent of the farms and repair the wire work or major repairs, they've obviously got their own staff that can do minor things. But when it comes to anchors and poles, major construction, I mean they usually call us in. I sort of started with father and we sort of start from the ground and up with new. We put the pegs in to square off the field then we put the posts and the wire up and we tie it altogether because the wire work, as you can see, is all tied together, which is quite time consuming. Every plant has two hooks. So, in this field alone there would probably be 8 or 10,000 hooks that have all got to be put on manually or with a compressor. And it's not as easy as people think. People say, you do the strings. All the wire, as you see, is specifically made for this job and again, and in recent years we have been struggling getting the right material. There were two firms that supplied up in Sheffield. Luckily, I don't have anything to do with materials, I just supply the labour and the knowhow. The farmer buys the equipment. Our local supplier he supplies and I do the work.

A lot of the small fittings, like the bolts and the links, the pre-formed dead ends, they come from Andover. And luckily, preformed products are very very clever. Before the onset of preforms, everything had to be wrapped by hand with a special pair of tongues to wrap it off, but whereas with the preformed products, they just grip the wire and were a boon to our

industry really. You didn't have to get on your hands and knees and wrap in the mud. And of course, the same with putting in the anchor blocks. Every cross wire has an anchor block that is in the ground, at least four-foot-deep with a third of a sleeper or half a sleeper on the bottom. Again, in my father's day, you used to dig ten a day and fill them in, whereas now probably, 50, 60, 70 a day on good going, which is so much easier now. I've spent many a day with a sledge hammer driving a bar through the ground to knock the bar through to meet the block.

Fortunately, I suppose, with the evolution, the industry has almost died a death in the last 20 and because of that, as I say, most of the people that worked for me have either been just drawing a pension or been made redundant. Most of them were hop people who worked on hop farms who knew their way round. When we did a big job in the Teme Valley I was lucky enough to take on two men who were foremen at hop farms plus a hop drier who had been made redundant, and they came to work for me and they knew the job. My job was fairly easy in the fact I could leave them to do quite a lot of the inside work. And the people I've got now are unfortunately a bit on the old side. But of course, the same as everything, when needs must you find people to do the jobs.

As I say the industry has gone now. There are still quite a few big hop farms, sort of factory units, and they have to rely on the foreign workers. But that's the way it has gone in most agriculture now, we have quite a few East European workers. Just to prove a point on the fact I'm probably still the last person to build wirework in the country, I had a chap who's a very good friend of mine now, from Sussex. We were born on the same day. He rang up and said, I see you've got your advert in the calendar for the supplier. He said I would have had to gone to Germany to get somebody with your experience, can I come and see what you do? Consequently, he came up, we met in the pub, I took him round, showed him all the work I had done the last twenty years, we had a short tour, and he said, you're just the man I need. So, I ended going all the way to Sussex and I built a six or seven-acre field for him and hopefully next year I will do another in the summer.

I think possibly, if they can find the right variety, maybe the dwarf variety will be the way. Because for several years I sampled hops for groups that were fully into dwarfs. And I say the idea is right because there are so few people, it's all machinery, but unfortunately that's the way it will go. Like corn and hay years ago

INTERVIEW 2

You see in recent years everything's gone back to dwarf hops, or down to dwarf hops, which is virtually like a fence, the dwarf hop. But people that are in hops, conventional tall hops, are

quite happy to expand now, because of micro-breweries, and craft beer at the moment, it's all the rage. So obviously English hops are in vogue again you might say.

Well I followed my father into the business. I've been putting up wire work for forty odd years now I suppose. And again, it was in a village that I lived in at Newtown there were four people who were capable of putting up wire work in the old days until it dwindled and the hops have dwindled. And we haven't got the infrastructure we used to have. Obviously, we rely heavily on foreign labour now, whereas the actual building of the wirework is a bit more technical and fortunately I am the only contractor left that does it full time now. There are one or two farms that have got their own contractors but I suppose I'm the major one in Worcestershire and Herefordshire and there is absolutely nobody in Kent who really know. They've all died out, got old, passed away or retired. I mean some years I'm really busy and some years I'm not quite so busy, but we've sort of kept going. I've always had two or three people work for me. But my father's been gone now ten or twelve years I suppose and he was the boss and I just followed on and became his partner. And I think, when did I start, the seventies, 1972 or something, and I'd got a bit of experience. My son, he's slightly different. He organises festivals, but he does help occasionally but I don't think he will follow on into the business, he's 30 now. But he does help. As it is now, with here at Will's we've put up six patches, six hop gardens and the boys are learning all the time. They are there learning the bones of the job. Maybe one day I'll take an apprentice on. Rob is my apprentice and the two before him, they were in their seventies. I am retiring age this year so I'm thinking well do I really want the problems nowadays, like health and safety and all that sort of thing. It's a tricky one. Obviously, the people that I employ are experienced people that I have known for years who have worked for me for a long time, so I don't have to worry about them. Whereas with employment the way it is these days, you have to charge so much....so an apprentice is out of the question really because of the price issue, which is a shame. But as I say, I wouldn't call it rocket science my job, but it's a stress and strain thing you know, where you have to pull wires one way and then the other to keep everything up right. It is quite technical but it doesn't look it because everybody that says, 'oh you string the hops, do you?' and even my best friends haven't got a clue, and they're farmers, they're just apple growers or chicken growers, and they've got no idea what I do for a living really.

Obviously, as you can see the way the plants are, the first thing is to find your square because obviously everything works off a square, get your rows measured out. We have a site square that we square out with and then a marking out line with a set distance – these plants are set at four feet, four by nine, four feet by nine feet. You see being old I can't go metric, so we stick with four by nine! And then we mark it out and then we

bore our poles in or get a digger to get all the poles in equal distance. And again, if you stand in a certain position, you can see all these poles are in line no matter where you look. If you're stood square you can see all these poles are in line. And we dig in, these are what we call anchor blocks. In the ground there, there is a third of a sleeper and those bars are five-foot long, so they're all dug into the ground every 18 foot. So, it's all sort of based on a square to keep it upright. So obviously all our poles are 20 feet long and we have an anchor, this is what we call an anchor. Eventually all this will have wire on, we've only wired part of it which you can see, there will be two wires to each row, then we go in and tie it all together. These are what we call cross wires that go across the field, which is fairly obvious, goes across the field, the number sixes run down the field and then they're tied together and wrapped with wire. And then after that we measure, every bay has got nine plants in it, so we put nine hooks on, that's top hooks, which is a little hook on the top to hold your string, and then you've got your peg in the floor, you can't see them but there's something called a ground peg, I could probably find you one. You see this is what you call a ground peg and every row has a peg to it and then when they string they string from the peg to the top hook at the top and a gang of people come in to do that. You have a ball of string and you go up and down, up and down, and fill the row up, and that's how basically the structure works. This is the crop we set up last year, that field there. The stringing is done in the spring, March April, and then the hops grow up obviously between then and September. I don't know if you will be around in hop picking but it could be a very interesting hop picking because as you can see the shed is a huge picking machine and everything has got to be up and ready in a month, so everything in that shed has to be ready to go. Whereas these hops here, they won't be picked this season, they will just be left to grow on to take root and then next year away they go and they will be the same as the ones in the other fields.

I used to get involved with the picking side of things. Like I said, I was born in a crib so they say. Well obviously, my mother and father were both involved, well my dad worked on a hop farm and I suppose the first thing I remember is holding onto a bagger, which was a hop pocket to press the hops, when I was four or five, yeah, so I've been around a lot of hop picking. I've probably worked on ten or 15 different farms in the county during hop picking and now, for my sins, I go around and take samples. So, I go to 80 percent of the growers and I cut a little sample out – that would be interesting, I could bring you some pictures of that, or even in hop picking I will be here taking Will's samples probably. We take two samples in every ten pockets or bales as we call them now. So that's my hop picking job. But before that I've done it all, I've done everything from being in the field cutting the binds in front, to being on a trailer pulling, being in the machine shed helping

with the machine, I've helped with the drying when we used to dry 24 hours a day. Yeah, I've got a lot of good memories. My favourite bit was probably hop drying when we used to dry 24 hours a day. Obviously in those days we had a lot of labour and you'd get the Brummies and the Welsh and the Gypsies. I mean Bishops Frome was like as big as Hereford in hop picking time. Incredible amount of people. And it was very good fun. Because obviously the rest of the year it's quite quiet. But you'd get a lot of people in Bishops Frome for a month. It was wonderful. There was a lot of fighting going on! It was good fun. The demon drink I suppose. And they'd trade horses down at Bishops Frome. It was an incredible time really. The hop picking machine came and then of course all the labour dissipated, just sort of went away, you didn't need so many people, and then the industry got smaller because I suppose because after the war supposedly the biggest surge on hops or during the war because they wanted the hops for khaki dye and things like that and it was a green crop then, nowadays everything's put into ice packs, and things like that. It's pelleted mostly, a lot of the hops are pelleted, whereas it was a green crop years ago, so obviously they needed more then. So, say a brewer bought ten pockets and he only used eight, two of those he would throw away because they had deteriorated. Whereas, nowadays they put them into ice packs?? And they can keep them forever as long as they got them refrigerated or in the cool. I think all the big brewers now pellet, they just put pellets in, ten pellets, or a hundred pellets, whatever they put in a brew, so they've always got surplus.

So, during the war they got a lot of uniforms to make and they must have found out that hops were good for dying, the right colour dye for the uniform, so a lot of the hops went for dye during the war and that era. And obviously I think for the troops to keep their morale up....I think between the wars, and don't quote me, the hop industry trebled, and of course with the miners, and the steel works in Birmingham, mining in Wales, it was a good thing.

Peaks and troughs, usually a world shortage and it seems, the supplier we've been in the industry together, we've come to the conclusion that about every seven or eight years you have a sort of an up and a down, like the waves on the sea, you go up and then down. And of course, with all the new varieties that are around, years ago there were only maybe two or three varieties. But with the Alpha extract, there is more Alpha grown, if you can understand what I mean, on less acreage, so a lot of the alpha is improved with the hops, whereas this type that Will's growing, the Fuggle, is the old-fashioned hop, Fuggles and Goldings were the original two hops in this county and that was nearly all what anybody grew. But of course, now there's at least four varieties you can see in this field. And they're bringing out new varieties all the time. And nowadays with the craft brewing they're looking, everybody's that in it, they're

looking for a different taste.