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Transcript:

My name is Pauline Davis, Councillor Pauline Davis, of Leominster Town Council. I've been there nearly 30 years. I've been in Leominster all my life and I'm very very interested in Leominster obviously. We call ourselves Leominsterites, doesn't sound very good but that's what it is.

My earliest hop picking memory would have been about four years of age and we used to gather at the rear of the Clifton Cinema in Leominster, near the big car park, which wasn't there in those days. We used to catch the lorry from there, quite a number of us, to Yeoman's at Canon Pyon. That was about four o'clock in the morning. The children had to gather together no matter how old they were or how young they were and get the bonfires going. And they had sticks for putting bacon on, boil the kettle, beautiful big black kettle. It was very cold the first morning. After that we used to go about seven o'clock. Yeoman's of Canon Pyon was the biggest hop yard and in there was the gypsy community in their caravans, and EastEnders from London would come along and have a whale of a time. At weekends they'd have their parties and things. It didn't involve the ones from Leominster, but they had a wonderful time there. Most of them went to Pasckes of Endale, like my auntie, Helmes on the Hereford road, Davis' of Brierley, there was quite a lot going that way.

My mother was a real worker and she was what they used to call 'scratting' in the cribs. She worked very hard and she made sure I worked very hard. When I was about four years old I used to have umbrellas upside down and we used to help that way, you know. Also, the children under say eight or nine used to have to pick the leaves out of the cribs so that the bushlers wouldn't take them you see. If there was leaves in there you had to get rid of them before the bushler came. That was our job and also looking after the fire, keeping the fire going obviously for food, they'd boil kettles on there.

The young ones used to have to go and gather wood to build the fire obviously, and of course a lot of the little ones used to chase across the fields after, but they did keep the fires going and it always tasted different somehow. And the tea, there was always a black kettle on there and I'm sure the tea tasted better than the conventional way of making it.

We didn't exactly mix with pickers from outside the area. We had our own little gatherings. At 9 years of age I had to pick ends with my mother. They used to put a division in the sacking and

we had to pick our own. At the end of the day I earned one pound and ten pence and I bought a galvanised bath with it to go in front of the fire, that was my contribution. Because in those days we had to wash with bowls or whatever. People didn't have bathrooms unless they were very wealthy. It was a very poor time during the war. The bath almost cost exactly the same as my day's earnings, 29 and six pence. That was a lot of money. One pound ten pence was three weeks' worth of normal wages. It was a lot of money. And of course I was thrilled to bits with what I had earned. My mother at the end of the day, and most of the women, earned about £30 for four or five weeks of picking there. The children did work very hard and those who didn't were in trouble.

We had to stay at the cribs at 9 years of age, perhaps even younger some of them, but I was nine I remember that. And the money, it was really important. And of course the children missed school for about two or three weeks and that wasn't very good. The 'bomber' used to come around, what we used to call the bomber, used to come around. He was supposed to prosecute but I never heard about a prosecution, but he used to try and gather the children to go back to school. That was very important but they were so needed out there they had to work.

Well hop picking was one of the most important things because all most everyone, no matter how wealthy they were, it paid for the children's uniforms to go back to school and it helped go through the winter. It really was very important.

We had to stay at the cribs at nine, well perhaps even younger than that. But I was there when I was nine, I can remember that. And the money, it was really important and of course the children mostly missed school for about two or three weeks and that wasn't very good. The bomber used to come around – what we called the bomber – and he was supposed to prosecute, but I never heard of a prosecution, but he used to try and gather the children to go back to school. That was very important but they were so needed out there that they had to work.

Sometimes we had a very good bushler and sometimes there was one among them that wasn't very good and he was very much disliked. So on the last day, whether it was pouring with rain or whatever it was, we would get hold of him and duck him in the crib, I can remember that. The nice ones I don't know if they got anything. I can remember one in particular, they certainly took their revenge on him, I can tell you that.

At the crib it was very difficult to pull the vines down unless the mothers or someone else come along and help because they were very difficult to get down. At the crib we were singing mostly, and we would sing our hearts out going in the lorry in the morning, absolutely. And going back if we were big enough, yes we would always sing. Coming around the mountains, that kind

of thin. It was good, it was like a holiday, a working holiday. The travellers used to come along but we didn't see a lot of them, we probably kept in our own little communities from Leominster. I can't remember many of them. But the EastEnders, I know had a fabulous time. Especially the Yeoman's and Davis's of Brierley, had a really wonderful time out there, it really was. One of the best memories I've got of hop picking.

The ladies who came along with us were very.... they had long black dresses believe it or not, and boots. They were spotlessly clean and white aprons. Because in those days they used to boil clothes, and they were lovely ladies. The only thing was, to me anyway, was that they used to take snuff and the brown from the snuff would come on their upper lips and I didn't like that at all as a child. I've remembered that all my life. I expect there's no difference from taking dope today really. My other certainly didn't take it or any of her family but these ladies did.

At the crib it was very difficult to pull the binds down and the mothers, or somebody, would come along and help them because they were very difficult to get down. And they used to stand at the cribs very industrious and they used to call it scratting. My mother was a particularly good picker.

At about midday the bread man used to come from Leominster in his van and the smell of fresh bread used to go all over the hop field and it was absolutely lovely and everybody used to look forward to that. And the big black kettle was put on and that was a break for them for a short time. I'm not sure he came every day but I think he did. But he was very welcome there I can tell you. Because otherwise it was sandwiches. Maggie Reynolds used to be absolutely spotless with her white apron and she used to bring her sandwiches wrapped in muslin and it used to look so nice. They weren't as you would think of someone working out in the fields, they were absolutely spotless. Everyone was in the same boat: they were poor but very clean. I have wonderful memories of it, really.

When we were at the crib we were singing mostly. And we would sing our hearts out going in the lorry in the morning, absolutely, and going back if we were fit enough. Yes, we would always be singing, 'Coming round the mountains', that sort of thing. It was good, it was like a holiday really, a working holiday.

The travellers used to come along but we didn't see a lot of them. We probably kept in our own little communities if you like. I can't remember very many of them. The EastEnders I know had a fabulous time, especially at Yeoman's and Davis' of Brierley as well. One of the best memories I've got is of hop picking.

One memory I've got is that at the end of the day the pickers and their hands, and the children, their hands were yellowy black from the pollen of the hops, and the cuts, right up the arm they used to have scratches, right up the arm. That was one thing that wasn't very good about it. I dint' enjoy that at all, but of course it did come off.

My hands were brown. Very difficult to wash off, from the hops. And the food in the morning, preparing the food. We had large baskets, almost like garden baskets, and we'd have our tea, loose tea of course, milk in a bottle, sugar.

In the morning we used to prepare for the day in large baskets, with food wrapped in muslin, lovely clean muslin, sandwiches. There wasn't so much cakes and bread because Saunders used to come down with their van, so that was covered, and we had milk and loose tea of course. There was no such thing as teabags in those days. No coffee. And sandwiches. And it was really great. I believe there were a number of fights but that was between the gypsies mostly. But not so much the EastEnders. But they had a very good time on there and there were fights, but not that we saw ourselves. We didn't see fighting, especially among the Leominster people. We really had a good time singing away in the lorries in the morning and the evening. And it was wonderful. In the mornings we used to catch the lorry from the back of the Clifton Cinema, there's a car park there and there's a lovely old birch tree. And that tree is still there and I keep an eye on it and I'm very friendly with the tree warden and she's keeping an eye on it, because that tree must be, I expect a couple of hundred years old because it was already at its full height in the 1940s and it's still there now. And we used to all gather there and get in the lorries. The first morning of course was 4am, which was a bit early but never mind and we suffered it, and any other morning it was about 7am and we were out at Yeoman's within the hour.

We got paid on the last day of picking and we all used to gather up in the big sheds at the top of the hop fields and they had books with the amounts each picker had and they used to pay out in cash. There was no cash, or cheques or banks, they were just paid out then. And when I was nine I was paid out separately. It was wonderful.

With my family and friends, I can remember back to when I was four years of age and that must have been early forties, and I must have been very young then. I used to be one of those with the open umbrellas and picking into the umbrellas. There was a strong sense of community around and in the hop fields. Leominster, when I left school in 1951, there were only 5,000 people here, now there's 11,700 and of course everybody knew everybody in Leominster. They were either a relation or we knew them as neighbours and friends, it was a very small town in those days. But Leominster has been a very important town. Going

back, it was next to Oxford in importance.

The May Fair used to come in the winter months down at the bottom of Etnam Street by the White Lion and we got to know the children there and they used to walk up to school with us. And that was the start of our love for the May Fair. So in 1987 I was on the town council – my husband was already on there in the seventies – and about 12 months after being on the town council I got a card from a Mr Edmonds I think his name was, from Wales, and he requested that I try and get the May Fair back because he'd heard I was so interested in the May Fair as a child. So I petitioned, I did it all on my own. My husband wouldn't get involved in it although he loved the May Fair. I used to stand on street corners on the square, bottom of every street, and I got a massive petition because the majority were all Leominster people, and they love the May Fair, kiss me quick hats and all this, you know. Eventually it got through Herefordshire county council. First of all, Leominster town council agreed to it to have the May Fair back in the streets. And there was a lot of opposition as well, but it came back in 1990 and Molly Cooke was Mayor then.

I have to say the day it opened it was wonderful. All the lorries come rolling in and it was a wonderful experience. Most of Leominster people love the may fair. But a lot of shopkeepers did have reasons for it not to come back. They said it would take away their trade and everything but that was rubbish. It was a wonderful day and that was in 1990. And now in 2016 the May Fair is still there and it has another couple of years to go.

It was a wonderful time and most Leominster people love the May Fair. But we did have quite a lot of shopkeepers have reasons for it not to come back in because they said it affected their trade and everything but that was rubbish. It was a wonderful day, that was in 1990. And it's now 2016 and the may fair is still there.

Now the May Fair boss was Abie Morris. I believe his great grandfather was Mr Studd, who kept the May Fair, he went to school in Leominster. Anyway, we got to know Abie and he was the May Fair boss with his daughter Jo and his family. Anyway, it's been very good, very few complaints. There was a fight on the actual day. They picked on my husband Ben who had been Mayor and Councillor Peter McCall came to his rescue. After that we had several petitions over the years. They'd have a couple of years then they'd have to apply again. There was a little bit of a niggle from some of the people in Leominster but gradually they came to accept it and quite love it in actual fact.

There are no problems any more. The last time they applied was seven years ago and I think they've got two more years before they have to apply again. But there is talk now of Leominster

town council of taking over the markets and of course the markets and fairs are on the charter of 1554. And really and truly it would be a heck of a thing if they got it out of the streets again. It's too popular now. The whole town council go into the square at the opening, we have an opening every year. Of course I'm invited every year regardless of whether I'm a councillor or not because I got it into the square and there was nobody else, I did it completely on my own and I'm very proud that I did. And I keep in touch withAbie died about two months ago and his daughter Jo Morris has taken it over and is making a good job of it. David and the others and young Abie do fairs all over the country, but Jo does Leominster. We have a good relationship with the west midlands branch of the Showman's guild.

The mayor of Hereford always invites the mayor of Leominster to Hereford's may fair and traditionally the rent is weighted in wheat. It's wonderful and we're always invited back to the mayor's parlour there. My husband and I both went and every mayor since. Wonderful.

As children we always went to the May Fair and would cry our eyes out when it went. And the morning it used to go from the square, the Noah's ark was in the middle of the square and we used to collect threepenny bits and sixpences as they were clearing away.

The may fair is important to the town. The ones who complain do grumble about it don't so much now and do rather love it. Most of the shops do quite well out of it. Especially down Broad street, they do very well out of it. I know when it first came into the town they didn't feel that way at all. But not all of them. Only about three shops in Leominster. But I think they have found that it's good for them.

It's very important, it lets people know how we lived years ago. The may fair was the big thing because of the children of the town, especially when I was young they were given money from Christmas to May Fair so we could spend it on the May fair because there's nothing else. I mean, don't get me wrong, we were quite happy, in fact we had better childhoods than they do today. Our childhood was wonderful, between the May Fair and hop picking, it really was wonderful. We felt free. We were allowed to go on our own everywhere and there was no danger. We felt free.

It was in 1995 the year I was a Mayor and we had a couple of American visitors and they loved tradition, the feel of an old market town if you like, they didn't' exactly go on the fair, because they were middle aged, and they had a wonderful day, it was really lovely.

The one big thing about the May Fair was Abie Morris. I think he was related to Stud??, who was very popular in Leominster in the

20s/30s, and ran the may fair. He was a wonderful man. And quite a number of us went to his funeral quite recently, he died about three months ago. He was a gentleman and had a lovely family, which his daughter is now running the May fair, jo.