Title:	Kirby, Will_Interview_Complete
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, setting up a new business

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Identifier:	Kirby, Will_Interview_Complete
Interview Date:	July_31_2017
Location:	Brook House Farm, Avenbury, Herefordshire, HR7 4LB
Source:	Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee:	Will Kirby (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:	30.19 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:	5.04 GB
Duration:	23 min 52 seconds

Type:	Audio
Audio Format:	MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate:	44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate:	256 kb/s
Stereo/Mono:	Mono
File Size:	44.3 MB
Duration:	23 min 52 seconds

Transcript:

So I'm Will Kirby of Avonbury of Bromyard. So I'm a partner in the farm with my wife and my parents. We took the farm over two years ago and we have been, you know, when we moved here we talked about how to modernise the farm. We were quite lucky, we had a profitable cider business, we wanted a couple of things to go alongside of that, so the farm is in a very beautiful setting, we've got views over to the Malverns, so we put in some glamping units, which are going well. They're managed by another couple who live on site. And then, it used to be a quite a notable hop farm in the area. There are only limited parts of the country where you can grow hops, and about half the hops grown in the UK are grown within about ten miles of here. So we looked up hops, and the increase in craft brewing recently, and typically they use a lot more hops than the lager you can buy in the supermarket. So we decided to compliment the apples and the glamping with a hop growing enterprise.

Well, barriers to entry? A lot of farm businesses are very cyclical. So if you the potato price rises, a potato farmer might put in a lot more potatoes, or if chicken farming is very profitable around here, a lot of farms have put in large chicken sheds. And I guess because I'm not from a farming background, I used to work in the city, I was looking for an enterprise with barriers to entry. Hop growing is not easy, it's susceptible to a range of different diseases. The amount of capital required is substantial. So not only do you have the trellis work, which is very labour intensive, and quite skilled, you also have all the picking and kilning machinery. Most crops you can harvest or grow and take to market or send off on a truck, with hops you have to do a lot of post-harvest processing. Because as soon as you've picked a hop cone it begins to rot or decompose in the field. You've got maybe two to three hours to dry it, which means you have to have almost an industrial unit, which can process those hops to get the best quality for brewers, and that happens on the farm.

Fifty or sixty years ago typically a farm would have a set up like this, where hops were put into pockets and carried off the farm in large sacks. It's quite labour intensive, you'd have a lot of workers scuppeting the hops, which is an old Herefordshire word, put the air through them, dry the moisture out. Whereas I went around the world looking at different hop processing technologies. And they're generally in either Northern Bavaria, which grows about 40 per cent of the world's hops, or in the Pacific north west in Washington State, and that

area grows another 40 per cent. And they've invested a lot in technology, to reduce the labour requirement and perhaps improve their quality of the product once it has been processed. So as a result of that on our picking machinery side, we're using a combination of old English machinery, which was made in Suckley about five miles from here and some machinery from the Halitau(??) so our kiln is made by a company called Wolff and they use various technologies to reduce labour and hopefully improve quality.

My family, on my father's side, is originally from the Black Country, which is where a lot hop pickers came from traditionally, before the process was automated and before farmers started using more Eastern European labour. There was almost a huge migration at the end of August of hop pickers from Dudley and Walsall down to Herefordshire to manually get the hops in. and my father, my grandfather rather, his autobiography, or memoir he wrote just before he died, talked about the family's links with a farm down in Herefordshire, and marriages between families, so I like to think we've closed a circle somehow by me getting back involved with hops. And my father has also been very involved in getting hop picking machinery up and running.

And this farm was previously a hop farm, but it's not the farm that was previously connected to my family. It was Brook House Farm in Kings Pyon, where they used to go and this is called Brook House Farm. Our hop picking machine came from a large hop farm down in Claston, near Dormington, just east of Hereford. And that farm converted from picking tall hops on traditional high trellis work to low trellis, or dwarf hops. And for dwarf hops they used a lot of the old machinery, but some parts, say the plucker bank(??), which strips the cones off the tall wire work is not necessary for dwarf hops. So that equipment was surplus to their requirements. We managed to buy it and we just about got it up and running in time for the harvest this year.

Well, last year we were harvesting, we almost wanted to get a dress rehearsal in, so we had some hops which looked healthy. We didn't have to harvest them but it was nice to have that little bit of cash and to get experience of drying. So we harvested about one hectare, we borrowed a neighbour's picking machinery, and another kind neighbour, Charles Pudge down in Bishops Frome allowed us to use his kilns. And we picked six pockets, which I was very proud of. this year we're looking to do it all ourselves, partly for bio-security, and partly just because the volume is, you know, an order of magnitude probably greater. And so we've spent a lot of the last year welding and grinding and building our processing facility. Touch wood – not much wood – five weeks to go, I really hope, you know, we'll be there at the end of August, because you don't have much time with hops between when they're ready to pick and when they're past it. You've only got about a week per variety and so we can't afford

to have any failures during hop picking.

Our varieties, we're growing a mixture of traditional English varieties, most of which nowadays get exported. The reason they like traditional English varieties from the UK is because our climate after a while allow (or terroir??) the hops to develop that subtle, almost herby flavour. Whereas if you take and English hop and you grow it in Germany you will get different flavours. Having said that we were also keen to support some of the more modern breweries which are growing very hoppy IPAs and so we've imported some planting material from other countries and we're growing Cascade, Chinook and Centennial, which are much punchier, citrusy almost, American varieties. We're also going to grow some of the newer varieties being bred here in the UK partly to address that market.

Well, hop growers generally grow at least three or four different varieties. They can space out their harvesting windows. so you might have a week to pick your Goldings and as soon as your Goldings are finished, your Challenger becomes ready to pick, and then later on you might be picking Cascade or Pilgrim, which is an alfa(??) and bitter variety.

There have been issues in growing traditional English varieties in parts of the UK, and that is because of wilt, which is a fungal disease which grows through the soil and is very difficult to get rid of, has a big impact on those varieties, so Fuggles and Goldings, which are the quintessential English bitter varieties, are very wilt susceptible. So that makes us quite lucky. We suffer from a lack of multi-generational, institutional experience in hop growing, but one advantage that we have, our soil is wilt free, hops haven't been grown here for many years, they were removed before wilt became an issue. It means we can grow Fuggles and Goldings to traditional English breweries. Whereas, some of our neighbours, aren't in that position or they might grow a form of Goldings, which is difficult to grow.

The hop industry used to be much more highly regulated than it was now, so hop farmers would be given a quota and whereas now it's much more of a free market, your competing with imports. But in many ways, as a hop grower you're not competing with German hops or with American hops, you're almost competing with very lightly-hopped lagers. A kilo of our hops might make a thousand pints of relatively tasteless supermarket fizz, it might make a hundred, two hundred pints of classic British beer, it might make only forty pints of strongly powerfully hopped IPA. And as those IPAs become more popular, that's driving up the hop price.

I think I've fallen a little bit too much in love with hops. Yeh, my wife and I were thinking of different things to do with the farm. That was mostly numbers-based process, so we didn't

want something just to keep us busy, we wanted to make the farm a thriving business, where we could reinvest in nice opportunities, we could pay our suppliers on time, we could employ people locally. And I went to my first hop picking, I think it was in 2015, one of my neighbours, who is now head of the British hop association, took me round some farms during hop harvest, and I didn't just like the bustle I suppose, I liked the smell, there's something about hops that makes them very different from other crops, at least I think. But I need to protect myself from falling in love with hops more than is financially justifiable I suppose. At one level, scale is a good thing in business, it drives down cost, but my wife jokes about being a hop widow. I don't want it to take over my life excessively.

We built a harvesting centre processing facility, which can harvest many times more hops than we have in the ground now. Having said that, as you grow more and more hops, typically it's become hard for farmers to enforce quality and inspect the crop for disease as intensively as they should do. So there may be a limit on the natural size of a hop farm. But currently we're planning to put more yards as long as price remains high enough for us to generate an economic return, as long as we're enjoying it and the guys on the farm are enjoying it. There are farms in the US where one single farm harvests more hops than the entire UK hop industry. I'm not saying we're going to get anywhere near that, but it's just that there is room to expand and hopefully as brewers and consumers of beer become more aware of British hop varieties, we'll be able to expand as the market expands.

Because hops are so susceptible to different diseases and because there are so many manual processes, hand work which needs doing out in the field, some of it is quite skilled, it's difficult for a potato farmer in Lincolnshire or a daffodil farmer in Cornwall to wake up and say, I want to grow hops. That expertise only exists in very limited geographic regions. We're very lucky we've been able to tap into a lot of those skills locally. So our hop manager is from a hop growing family, grew up on a hop farm, he's worked on some of the biggest hop farms in the area. And there have been other farmers in Suffolk and Yorkshire which have grown hops and it hasn't worked. So I hope we can break that recent trend of new hop farmers failing cannot make out the latter part of Will's sentence here.

I can walk into the local pub during hop drying and find five or six people, who will be able to tell me when a hop is too dry or when it is just ripe, because if you dry your hops insufficiently, they're 12-14 percent moisture, you put them in a bale and they're likely to self-ignite, which will give you a horrific kiln fire and probably destroy part of your crop. If you dry them to six or seven per cent, you're removing a lot of the oils, which brewers want, and you're forgoing that little bit of water in your bale, which will boost your profits

slightly. I think that kind of expertise isn't distributed evenly throughout the world or throughout the country. Yeah, it's really helped us.

Most of the farmers around here have told me that I need my head seeing to, that I'll quit after my first proper hop harvest. it does give me the heebeegeebees slightly, because of the older hop farmers around here perhaps came out of hops ten years ago. They've done quite well out of cider apples, but none of them have gone back into hops. And there may well be a reason for that, but I'm young and I've got a chance to make my mistakes.

One reason we were keen to stop growing corn or a lower value crop and move to more intensive horticultural farming, so that if subsidies do get removed, the subsidy becomes a less important part of your farm's income. Access, the other big EU angle for a farm like this, is access to Eastern European labour. our hop shed has been built largely with Eastern European labour, our hops are trained with Eastern European labour, we have strings put up in the hop yard with Eastern European labour. I'm really grateful to those guys for coming over here and living away from their homes, and we pay better than your average farm. Not an expat salary. And if access to Eastern European labour continues to be, or is made more difficult as a result of Brexit, it will be very hard for farms like this. It will be very hard for British brewers to produce British beers with British hops. We've invested a fair amount in automation but there are certain jobs you just can't get a machine to do.

Other challenges, I guess, are disease, keeping the wilt out and various other bugs and fungi which can affect hops, it's very hard work. We've got a very good team here and work very hard at it. And then I guess the other challenge, the other biggest challenge, is the hop price. we've entered into fairly long contracts for some of our hops but we might have to stop planting new hop yards or pull yards out if price becomes unsustainable. I think that price and the growing popularity of beer with very few hops in is really what's led to the big decline in UK hop acreage over the last few decades.

Well I think there are a lot of people, particularly in the Black Country and the East End have very fond memories of hop picking and the smells and their time out of the city and in the Countryside. So I think a lot of people of that generation have very fond memories of coming back to Herefordshire or going hopping down in Kent and the time they spent with their families have helping about was a nice break for them for urban life. Although people tend to over romanticise the past I suppose. I should think they worked very hard but you know if they have fond memories it's nice for those memories to be rekindled I guess. I also think a lot of people on a hot summer's day enjoy a British pint and you can't make a British beer without British

hops and it’s quite nice to show where those hops came from and where the work that goes into it this end. So if you’re paying an extra 50p for a can of Brewdog over a can of imported lager you can see where that 50p is being spent and all the love and the care that goes into hop growing in an area like this. Being interviewed is quite a new experience. like I said the other day, it hasn’t been easy for a lot of these farms. I mean I just, I’m enthusiastic and new to this industry, but for someone like Mark Andrews who you met briefly earlier, he’s been through very hard times. not him in particular, but most of the hop growers around here have carried on for love not for money and uh yeah,

So building wirework is technically very difficult. You’re almost trying to create a building or a platform out in the field which will support the weight of these bines. As we go through August towards harvest and there’s a storm and it’s raining heavily, you can have your trellis taking hundreds of tonnes of load and you really need a man building this who knows what he is doing. A lot of that expertise has died out. Mervyn is the last man in the country who knows how to put up a hop yard, he’s a contractor. And so we’re very lucky. He lives three or four miles just south of here and he comes here and builds hop yards with his team, sometimes using our guys. He learnt the process from his father and his son’s starting to get involved now, though he does some other stuff also. So we hope to be able to keep this skill going. There are some farmers who still have the skills themselves and they build their own wirework. Don’t tell Mervyn this but we’re trying to pick up some of his skills ourselves. So if he is hit by a bus we’d at least be able to have a stab at it. He spends time down in Kent, giving advice down there and has a team up here who built. Mervyn or his father has built most of the hop yards in this part of the world. so if you’re ever drinking a British beer chances are those hops were grown up wirework that were built by Mervyn Carless