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Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee: Jerzy Kwapniewski (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
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Video Format: MPEG-4
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Transcript:

My name is Jerzy Kwapniewski and I'm Polish and I came over the UK more than 18 years ago but I stick to this place for at least 18 years in a row time. And then we are in Stocks farm, just opposite the hop picking shed and behind of me we can see the hop yard which is already done a few days ago. We finished just now the hop picking season. We still have just a few bales only and looking forward for the next one. This is mainly what we have right now. First time I was invited by my colleague from the university because at that years when we were studying they introduced like a programme for students, like exchange. So, he had a chance to go before me to UK via some organisation, and I was linked to that a year after chance to go to UK. It was quite difficult at that time where we still had a separation east and west countries things like that. And I just landed not far away from here, on a hops farm as well. So, it was my first year when I arrived to UK and I think after three or four years Richard and Mr Capper by incident, their apples to do their cider. And then we had a chat and basically, they introduced their place and asked if I would be interesting to come to next season, and that is how it started. And since then I just come every year for 18 years, as I said, in a row already.

Basically, I went through all the places involved in the work on the farm. On the first year I started on the floor as you can describe it, hooking the vines, working on the trailer and bringing them to the shed, then obviously I was tractor driver as well and then later on I was eventually asked to move to their hop picking shed to do their drying. Now I am drying hops basically, which I am looking after the hops when they been brought to the shed and then it is my role to send into the kilns. Obviously, it must be considered with a few points during that time. We are also looking for the transportation that has been bought in, but describing the moisture point, I don't mind, it depends. If you bring loads obviously you need to more time to dry it then later on you are reducing the time plus the fact I have to consider the weather as well, is it raining or is it sunny or windy day, so everything matters but the main point is to get around the target, which is ten per cent. And then finally you make the bales and they are ready to ship to the brewers or anybody who is buying off us.

Already the years I have spent on this farm there have been changes, drastically. Probably no one likes big changes straight away. From the workers' point of view I can say we have pretty good accommodation right now and facilities to live on during the harvesting season. But looking on the work side, the first

year I arrived we were already going quite well with the process we had but during the time we moved on forward. I can point one big fact which is making a bale or making a bags, where in the past time we had an old traditional bales we call it, they were big sacks, 85 kilogrammesand it is controlled by the computer so it is more handy and involves less physical work where in the past we had to do it by hand. Saying that, there is also a very important point because to work with process like we are now, it's more computerised but you are not involved as much as before. Where in the past time doing the job by hand you have access to see the moisture or you could mix it much better, where now some hops that are in the hopper not enough moisture then obviouslybecause hops over dried. I haven't picked hops in Poland whatsoever. There is no hops at all. The first time I was bought to the hops it was in UK. Obviously, I have to say thank you very much for the opportunity and some experience I got of it.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WHEN YOU FIRST ARRIVED FROM POLAND?

It was a bit different becausewhen I arrived first time to UK I wasI met slightly different culture and different politically as well compared to my home land but it was a very positive way I had seen it. So I was very pleased and is still probably why I still keep coming to UK for such a long time. Personally, I've got no problem, whatsoever. Obviously, time of Brexit came in but probably they were already, I would say, but at some point, maybe they need to be exposed and face more than the past. But to me nothing changed. Even the Brexitand I can say I still got the same people as a friend, friendly people, and we spend some time together, I can go to the pubs as well.

The first time when I came over, because as I said I was on the other farm, there were English students mainly, and there were some Australian as well plus one or two New Zealanders, which was again a very nice experience. Later on, for a long time we kept some relationshipbut it moved on and it went apart, butbut later on, with myself, I bought my sister once, my colleagues of university they've been a few times as well. But I can see in the past time more English people were involved with the job on the farm where in these days you see mainly foreigners like myself. They are probably again from eastern countries more or less, but I can see at least, mainly in this place, mainly from Poland.....but also I found the farm appreciate work we war doing and then they keep asking and inviting us for next season and it is probably why most of the staff are from Poland. Plus, some regular people from the farm we work along. I mean maybe it is something related to opportunity in other jobs or people just looking for some I would say easier jobs rather than hard work on the farm, which I have to point it is a hard work. Mainly physical work but then there are machineries operating around us as well. Because in agriculture you have a

certain time to take the crop off the hop yard or any crop taken off in the right period because if not it is lost straight away. So I can say that yeah, it is going quite well and I can see still, I hope, that the Brexit won't change for the future a lot regarding that sort of situation.

During the whole year I would pick up at most four months. When I go back I have a part time job, I come back and have a regular job straight away and I don't have to worry. Obviously, it would be difficult to keep a regular job and then have four months during the year off work, so I accommodate that quite well and why the flexibility I have got allow me to come over in a certain time. I like it very much and I stick to the place. I can see that the farm is looking after me and looking that I can come back again and also, I have to say, it was pointed to me a good few times, that they appreciate all of my work and work my colleagues done as well, so this is probably why, season by season, and I think experience I got already, plus people I met, also some opportunity to learn something else and see something else. Because you could say one place one year is similar to other place, but unfortunately in agriculture everybody would say a year is different to the past one. You are still learning and learning, probably nothing is going to change with that because so many points matters and you can almost foresee everything. Again huge difference from when I arrived here to UK and in this days, where in the past time Polish agriculture was split for very ????? patches I would say. Just a few hectares at most and probably everybody in the village own a few hectares, their own land and they were looking after that. Whereas in this days there has been big change, they have been accumulated, which means efficiency came on, it is very high, which is why people basically sold out. Today I would say why the industry is quite similar because the machinery are very similar. Almost what you see in UK you got in Poland and the land become like hundred hectares and the same in Poland and the land become one hundred hectares or more, which makes really big progress for our agriculture. But probably thanks to people like me but not just only, they came over they got some experience they see how your industry and your agriculture is doingthere must be a link with that.

I think I can describe I do my best. I been doing my best to being involved in the work and get a feeling I am able to do it. There is some responsibility on me which obviously I would like to pay back and I think I have some passion to the job as well which I try to expose and probably it is noticed as well I can say. I am quite good time keeper plus I switch on, I can say that because it is not really one point I focus on lots of things around. Sometimes I pull out on one work to fill the gaps and what else you can learn from me. I'm quite positive person anyway, and open and friendly, so there is my character probably and it is why people probably want me to come back to UK.

The first time I arrived to this place I won't last long and the smell for me was awful. But I think during the first season I started changing slightly andmy nose stick to the smell and then today after such a long time I even more see the smell in a completely different way as a part of my job I have to rub the hops by hand. Obviously, the hops is oily, very oily and their smell now is very intensive, some varieties very similar to they say citrus or Christmas trees perhaps something like that. So I can also recognise some varieties by smell, it is that sort of point. Obviously, the oily stuff is yellow and they stay on the hands but the part of the job are probably the good side of the job because the rest of it like when my role is you spend pretty long time very tough job, some people may thing, oh it is easy to sit in the cab and drive the tractor but it's not. First thing, you still drive tractor on the road with a trailer, but the most important thing is you got three guys on the trailer, which you drive with them.....where he's exposed really high and potential risk of wires or hooks or even fall which lucky something like that never happen to us, and then the wheel is rotating as well. So we have to be really involved but tractor driver you have to look in the front where you going to, then you got the posts between the lines which you have to avoid but still pick the hops offplus I said those three people.

A funny story with those other people that happened. To keep the hops off the hop yard is almost like a long process. Start on the beginning of the row and keep going and when you have to stop you do it. But if nothing happened you just keep going.....he slipped off and he landed on the trailer.....on the hops, but no one seen it straight away. So I kept going and suddenly in one moment and suddenly someone noticed that one guy was missing because he hasn't shouted for any help. He was not looking for us to give him a hand. So we say, where is he, so obviously we stop. We laughed about because we quickly realise that someone.....and eventually his face appeared and he was covered completely with the hops. He was not injured or nothing happened. He laughed together with us. and similar situation happened later on when we changed the drying system during the emptying baskets we supposed to stay on the hard floor, but the baskets are quite heavy and you can lose your balance, and again something like that happens to one of us. he slide into thenot looking for help and he did not dig out of the hops and two of us eventually seen a hand off the hops, we've seen him actually landed, but we thought him getting out himself first rather than wait until we do it. But again, it was very lucky and wasn't potential dangerous. Full of hops everywhere, in the hair, clothes, just like an easy story.

Stringing we can say this is the beginning of the process. I come usually beginning of March, mid-March and this is why process of hops starting. The best way to do during the winter period because you have no plants whatsoever around the hooks. From the bottom to the top and then you've got a hook in the

ground and then a hook on the top on the wire and then you use a bamboo stick, which we call monkey, with some special pipe on the end, where string goes through and then you got a ball with a bag or a sack or whatever convenience to carry on the ball of string and a line from the bottom to the top, then jump to the next one and come back to the bottom and then all the time around. It is very easy to do it, to mess up, even for regular to miss a hook or you forget what you are doing you can go to the next one or to the second row. It is very easy for experienced man to spot it say few hooks later on because you can see I am doing something wrong I shouldn't be. Again, it's easy to repair it. You can cut it down then come back and go on without thinking what you are doing. But it is very easy as you say over jump almost like a cross word that sort of thing.

I hear some history from this farm and the about hops from Mr Capper himself. I also hear about the hop as a plant last easily for about a hundred years in the ground and in the past time the hops was cut and left until the next season. But in this days we cut the roots between to get more air, more oxygen, to get a better crop as well. The ground is not as hard, as tough without intervention. As a whole process, beside the diseases. They still come from time to time, like red spiders or some other stuff that you will need to control really well if not they could spoil the patch really well. But more or less for those yearsif it works you just help to improve rather than change everything drastically.

I can't imagine doing the acreage we have and mechanised vehicles, like bine cutting, which is on the end of the hops you have to cut by hands, you have a hook or sickle and you are cutting right to the ground, the rest being left where you cut the bine off. No, the volume we are doing this days overights straight away or falls down on its own before it would get picked off the vines. But even so you need to operate with people you can rely everything on combines or machineries because I think the role we are having on this farm is still very important must be controlled by people and I think it going to last really long. It is helpful for this place that most of the team is Polish. The communication at least. Even Poles are picking up English language really well and quickly. We realise it is necessary and it is obvious and a normal way you would like to communicate with people then you have to learn their language. But because they are from part of the country and almost their village where I do live and then other colleagues, so we know more or less each other, we know characters, we know attitudes, which is helpful as well. I think the cooperation between us. I can't see any problem to work with English people or other nations as well, which we used to do because first few years how they were giving up slowly and eventually we are only with foreigners right now, but eventually I would say it is advantage because communication. But I couldn't see any different if we would have English people as well.

I met one man who was a photographer and I've seen some photographs he's taken, they were really professionals. From my point of view, I was surprised someone like a good photographer was involved in hop picking. But he had to give up for a while for that for what he was telling me, he wanted to have a rest, get a different experience. Strange for me but we met long ago and we had a good time together and even and thanks to that I had a chance to talk to him about photography, his experience, what he's done in his life. But for some of the years, because it is a seasonal work, and you got thirteen, fifteen people involved in a hop picking all of the time, so it's not only a place you work all of the time, but also a place where you meet other people and then even if they come from your village and you know them you think quite well, you see different roles, different characters and then some talents of them as well, which you would never see. So I think again something positive about.

I would like to describe in a few words our hop season, hop stringing and then it's been carried on for two to three week's time. Then obviously we are waiting for the plants to start growing up. Usually to the end of April there is time to start hop tying. Hop tying takes about four to six week's time, and then we have a gap and obviously there is a lot of maintenance going on like spraying, using fertilizer and looking after hops and after that you have the last role which is bine cutting and it involves cutting the left bine on the ground right to the bottom and then that's the season over with hop picking.

WHAT DO YOUR FAMILY THINK ABOUT YOU COMING OVER HERE?

I think in a positive way. My family is not extremely happy that I have to leave them for four months in a row time but we already calculated very well the time I spent here and the time I spend here and the time later on I can stay together with them. So I think obviously I think it is the best option. We are in touch all of the time.....every day I spoke to him, I can almost have whole image how he is doing in the school, what's he got or what's he going to do in the afternoon. So it's not I am completely off contact with my family. But for the village it is also a positive side, even I have some comments from the colleagues and the people, obviously we have to say we come here to earn money, so this is a financial way, which supports families and supports their budgets really well. Quite often we have a couple from the family or brothers and sisters as well. So I think thebring. Obviously, it is up and down because of the currencies but there's not much we can do about. However it is always a big support for them.

The accommodation for us is a very important role in this place and thanks to agreement with the owners, we got our own caravans parked on the premises for all of the time. And it is very

important for us to have that sort of access, the goods with you, you don't have to worry what is going to happen with them and obviously for those who come so regularly to this place it's a big advantage. You've got your own staff you've got kettle's cooking all the very necessary to use it. And then season by season you've still got them. So I am very pleased with the opportunity plus we also got the accommodation provided by the farmer as well for those who come once for few times during the season. But I am very happy with the accommodation and obviously it is like my private home on this farm as well and few others they say in their caravans as well. So as I said, it is a good advantage to have some opportunities to use them. Yes, we do socialise on our way, but it is limited to the time you need to be ready for the next morning because the work involves usually six days a week. We have our meetings in one of the big static caravans or local pubs as well like Nelson around here or even I've been good few times in Crosskeys, again local famous bar. I met there some people I used to work with long long time ago. They are already retired in this days. And then we have a few pints together and come back to the time we spent together like last time I met a person who lives not far away from here and so still we are very pleased to see each other often, so interested to see how we going and their lives and my life as well, my family. Sometimes I go only, but very rare, twice, three times a year to do the windsurfing but not during the hops because it's too short time here to do the windsurfing I need to get a weekend off and this opportunity to be involved in a social life.