

Title: Parker, Barry_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

Identifier: Parker, Barry_Interview_Complete
Interview Date: October_11_2017
Location: Instone Court, Munderfield, Bromyard, UK
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee: Barry Parker (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahoney (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
Language: English

Type: Video
Video Format: MPEG-4
Bit rate: 30.21 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: 6.3 GB
Duration: 29 min 50 seconds

Type: Audio
Audio Format: MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 256 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 55.1 MB
Duration: 29 min 50 seconds

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Records Centre

Transcript:

John Barry Parker of Instone Court, Munderfield. Born and bred.
Born in the room above. And that's who I am.

One of my first memories is hop pickers, hundreds of hop pickers in the buildings everywhere. I was always a bit frightened of them, but they were very nice people really. They were certainly short of money and it was a good holiday for them because they had no other chance of going out into the country. Some of them took it seriously and earned money and others of them treated it as a holiday. It just went on and on and on. But the majority of them came to earn some money. We used to have a strike every year. It was the thing to do to have a strike. And father got the buckets out and gave them plenty of cider and next morning they were back at work! It always happened like that. But you always had to have a strike, it was the thing to do. It was a day off really!

MOM: where they shouting and demanding?

BP: oh no, no, no, no, no. they was more quiet than anything: 'we're not going to work, have some cider, oh thank you'. Father was a past master of that. He always said there was far more done by licking than by biting, as any old spaniel will tell you. And he was very true about that, it's very true even to this day, isn't it? You get far more by kindness than threats.

You always appointed a ganger woman in the area, someone you'd known probably for years, and she would assemble a gang of people to bring with her. And she would arrange – it was old Mrs Jackson originally – and she would arrange transport. And we would pay the driver for use of his bus and lorry. And that's how they got here. But they used to come and go very often, I don't know how they travelled. The husbands would come down at weekends.

MOM: you said they would arrive in two trucks and leave in three?

BP: oh, well, that's because there were apple orchards and they would spend their all evenings gathering apples and take them back to Birmingham and sell them on the streets! But I don't blame them. In those early days we couldn't sell them anyway.

The kiln, ah... originally it was two small kilns with open anthracite fires and no fan, and then father put in a fan that drove both kilns, but it was still open fire. You had to be very

careful, if you let too much wind under an anthracite fire it goes to clinker. It was quite a skilled job. You could hardly leave your fire more than an hour. And I didn't do any drying in those days of course, but I was about there and saw what went on. But there was two old, Godwin and Corbett, that did all the drying. Then of course we went from there and we knocked the two kilns into one, make one big one, then we built another kiln, and then we went to oil, and that's how it went. We've got five now, sorry, four kilns now.

The anthracite came from one of the deep pits in Wales, where the hard coal is. I think it was called Gongykerwin (5.24 or THIS CAN'T BE CORRECT SPELLING MO'M), or some such name, sounds like that. but not being a very good Welsh speaker, I wouldn't honestly know. But I think it was Gongkygerwin. And it arrived at Bromyard in railway trucks, we went down with horse and cart, horse and waggon, and hauled it from there and put it in for the winter, and used it during the winter. And if there was any over of course it would provide fuel for the Aga. Used to have to crack it up a bit. That's one thing I used to love doing, when they raked out the fires in the morning, they put it in a pile outside, and take a potato and stick it in there. By dinner time he was beautiful. The skin and all was perfect. I don't suppose you'd try it like that these days. Used to be hungry in those days though.

MOM: what was your least favourite job?

BP: Powdering and sulphuring. Both dusts. Sulphur was the worst because you did that in the day light when you were sweating and it stuck to your eyes, stuck to the sweat. It ran into your eyes and you couldn't see a damn thing. Powdering was always done at night and it was nicotine, started off about 2% and stopped at 4% I think. Dust to kill the aphids. If you got the aphids young enough it would do the job well, but once they got to adults, they couldn't hold it up, it was like a honeypot to them I think. It bred immunity to them in the finish and didn't kill them. So, we went over to other stuffs.

MOM: do you remember when you got your first machine?

BP: oh yes, I do. It was great fun, it was only a little thing, tiny thing, but it picked us 60 sacks a day, that's all we wanted in those days. It was a Bruff, straight after the war I suppose. Everybody went for them. They were absolutely unknown two years before and next year everybody had got one. They were the invention of the devil, we thought at the time, but, oh, wouldn't it be awful without them. You couldn't do it actually.

Well, you didn't need anybody from Hensford and Dudley. They still wanted to come some of them and they used to come and work on the machine for a year or two 'til they realised that the glamour had gone out of it. It was back to hourly working rather

than pleasing yourself what you did. And they gradually died away, or stopped coming, or their own conditions improved probably.

MOM: did you have travellers coming here to work?

BP: Travellers? Yes, occasionally we had one family. We've still got one worker here today of the origins that came here years and years ago. There again one was a traveller and the husband was an ex-miner. There used to be 2000 Welsh and 2000 travellers coming to Frome. That's when old Fred Harris was in charge. You've heard of him I expect. He was a lovely policeman. He said he ruled with a bunch of five, and he did too! He always had a couple of mates come along and help during hop picking. But there's a lovely story. His son Edgar became a police inspector in Birmingham. And one day one of his colleagues from the other side came in and said, 'Mr Harris, we've got some trouble with some gypsies. I can't get them to move. You know how to deal with gypsies.' Well, he said, I don't know anything about gypsies than Adam and Eve. Because I knew Edgar quite well at that time. And off he goes over with this chap to see these gypsies. And they all knew who it was. They said, 'oh hello Mr Harris, we're moving, we'll be gone tonight. And they did. And he said I've never been so glad to be my father's son! That was a good many years of course.

MOM: was PC Harris kept busy?

BP: oh yes, but they knew him. They respected him. He did once hit one bloke in the place down in the Chase I think and knocked the bloke out behind him. I don't think you'd better put that in your story!

MOM: what was Bishops Frome like in those days?

BP: Well, when they stopped picking it was murder, you couldn't move down the street for folks. There were two pubs there and they were a roaring trade, still, somebody's got to drink they beer, don't they, they picked it all.

MOM: what about the tokens farms issued to pickers?

BP: Oh, that's when you were measured, at the crib. Instead of paying you there and then on the spot. It was big bushel baskets and it was generally about two or three to the shilling you got to fill. If you got them down to two you were doing well, if you got two off the governor. Some people gave out tokens, which could be cashed at the farm shop. But not everybody did that. We in fact booked. My sister in fact used to do the booking. They had a little card and you had a card, and if you picked ten bushels at this measuring it went down in the book as ten as well. So, you could add it up at the end. No question of altering or anything like that. Ten bushels that would be a good

half day's pick that would for one person. If you picked 20 in a day you were doing well. As soon as I left school I was put to do the measuring. I don't say I ever enjoyed it, but it was all the fun as well I suppose.

MOM: we heard that bushlers had to be quite tough?

BP: well, agile more than tough I think. They'd have you in the crib if they could. But I always busheled with one foot over the bottom rail, they couldn't get me in then! No, they were a fairly peaceful lot really, there weren't too many men amongst them you see, they were mostly women. So, they didn't attack me too often, poor little boy. I suppose I was about 16, 17.

MOM: do you remember any pickers giving you any trouble?

BP: no, not really. There was always some old man, I think it was Hackett, He always moaned, but you never took any notice of it, it was just him. He was like that. But you took it in your stride and everybody's different, aren't they? And some of them were absolutely delightful. I always remember him, he was a little eccentric I suppose. I never got chucked in the crib, not once.

MOM: did you ever see it happen to anyone else?

BP: Well I never saw many other people bushling, I was doing it myself, so I didn't. there was a lot about that but I never saw any of it. Especially the last day, they would try then, but they never succeeded. It was a bit like the end of Christmas, the party breaking up almost, and they were all looking forward to the bit of money they got collected to take home. It was generally to buy shoes for the children. I can remember years after, we had one little boy, his mother was Spanish and she had married a miner in the Midlands, and this boy he was an imp, he really was, he was into everything, ass out of his trousers, he'd have the lot, just as he should be. And some years later, a knock on the door and I went to answer it and, you don't know who I am, do ya? And I said, 'yes, you're Freddie Burkes', and there he was in a brand-new Merc. He done all right. He was a mischievous bugger. But there you are, that's how you get on.

MOM: when they arrived did they look poor and needed money?

BP: oh yes. It's a long time ago. My memory's not that good. At least for most things it isn't. things I want to remember I never can. I never could remember names.

MOM: I was told some of the Welsh pickers used to bring whippets.

BP: oh yeah, a lot of them had dogs. All the gypsies did too, their own dogs. I can remember one year, this field in front of

the house, waking up one Sunday morning, and there was about 70 horses in it. They were just getting them out, take them along at night and turn them into a field where there was plenty of grass and fetch them just before the boss woke up in the morning. Oh, we were full of horses.

MOM: were they selling them?

BP: They used to go up the Hollybush here on a couple of Sundays after hop picking, you get them trotting up and down the road and one thing and another. Old Ted Price the landlord, he knew how to handle them. He did very well out of them I should have thought.

MOM: when did you take over from your father?

BP: I don't know that I ever did. We still trade as Sidney J Parker and Son. You don't take over to the dot, it just grows on around you. I notice Simon's doing it to me. If you want something, I used to do it to father. You'd suggest it to him. You'd know damn well he'd say no. Simon knows I shall say no. and then about a year later at the most, he'll come back and say, well I think if you read so and so, and they say exactly what you'd hope they say, and that's how you progress in farming. You think it out a long time and then commit yourself, wholeheartedly.

I think you have to have a passion for hop farming. I love the things. They are intriguing, sometimes they are worth a lot of money. Not always. Sometimes they are a damned expense and a very big disappointment. But they are always interesting. I know the idea of going into business is to make money, but I'm not sure that is the right answer. I think it's to live a satisfying life.

It was all gypsies though and a few locals, but there weren't many that did that.

MOM: how many acres did you grow as a young man?

BP: about ten. We had some pole work all through the war, just two poles, instead of the stringing they do today. It was ash poles, sharpened and stuck in the ground, and the hops grew up the poles. The old beggers, the hop pickers. That's when you had the pole man, he was the chap that looked after the hops in the yard with the pickers around. He was supposed to get the poles for them. But if they were waiting they would wriggle and wriggle and make sure they broke him off and they could have a good fire. It was a great skill that pole pitching. They'd put them at one side and the other one the other side. No matter how crooked the poles they would have to twist them so they all...they were very clever. And old Corbett did it here for years. He was a stockman really, but he was blooming good at

that.

MOM: how many pockets would your ten acres produce?

BP: about 70 something I think. Worrying me now. I think the first-time father was here, he had 18 pockets the first year. I presume they were Fuggles or Emin Jones. Emin Jones was a huge great hop, very coarse. We never grew Golding's, Fuggles. And I started using Northern Brewer and things like that. There are far too many varieties now.

The greatest threat has been disease, downy mildew, without any shadow of doubt. The wilt has done a lot, but then they've got the wilt varieties that are resistant, not resistant but tolerant. So, breeding progress, but definitely downy mildew is the worst thing, still is. We were affected last year by it.

Evaluation: I've often thought that hops have evolved more than most things. So that there has been a vast improvement in hops, let alone anything else. I mean you get more milk out of a cow because you breed differently, but that's not the same thing quite. Hops you have to wait for them to grow, you can't do it in five minutes, it takes years. We've got a hop now, which we think is a resistant Fuggles to the wilt, but nobody will help us out. Dr Darby says it is a Fuggles but other people say it isn't. but until we can resolve that, we don't know what to do with it. It cost £7000 quid to have it DNA'd, or whatever you do, I think it's something like that.

There's such a change, that from the time I was a boy to now is unrecognisable to be honest. And it that isn't recorded, and old fogeys like me are out of the way... nobody'll know what happened. Because it is an interesting story there's no question about that. Peter Davis was an inspiration to hop growing really. He could do things to hops that nobody else could, and not always the right thing, but he tried it. But it doesn't want losing, no.

To watch the complete interview and others, please visit:
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