

Title: Parker, Simon_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, Simon_Interview_Complete
Interview Date: October_11_2017
Location: Instone Court, Munderfield, Bromyard, UK
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee: Simon Parker (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahoney (speaker, female)
Camera & sound: Rick Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith (female)
Language: English

Type: Video
Video Format: MPEG-4
Bit rate: 30.20 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: 4.35 GB
Duration: 20 min 36 seconds

Type: Audio
Audio Format: MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 256 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 38.1 MB
Duration: 20 min 36 seconds

Original copyright: Catcher Media Social CIC CC BY-NC
Holder: Catcher Media Social CIC, Herefordshire
Libraries, Herefordshire Archive and
Records Centre

Transcript:

I'm Simon Parker, living and born here at Instone Court, Munderfield, Bromyard. Here at In Instone this year we picked about 80 acres of hops, ranging from Aroma to Alpha hops, we've been on for six weeks, and, yeah, we've had a fairly good season.

Can you tell me how many pockets that is?

No, that's a bit like asking a gamekeeper how many birds he's put down. You don't always tell the truth. We've done more than 600 pockets this year. We run on different planting systems, we're planting distances, so we go right through from 1500 bines, sorry, it's 3000 bines per acre – you've got to double it up for bines, for plants – so anything down to 2000 bines per acre. The theory is that there's more light you get more hops on a bine, as opposed to having tents, you get more bines, but less hops. Generally, we like to run the harvester at a thousand bines an hour, so we pick nine and a half thousand bines a day, that's what we're planning.

MO'M: What is the hop farmer syndrome?

SP: Yes, lack of sleep! The irony is it's our longest hours yet you're dealing with a plant that makes you go to sleep, that's very soporific. I do appreciate my third week of hop picking syndrome which is: the first week you are keen, the second week you are tired, and the third week you really don't care, and after that the body just adjusts and you just carry on through the motions.

MO'M: tell me about the aroma?

SP: the aroma has now changed so much through the season. You start with the early season stuff that really doesn't have the greatest aroma, but that's the best for brewing. And then you obviously move onto the pungent flavours, because there's a variation of flavours of the different varieties we now grow, like Earnest and Bramley Cross and Admiral, and the new one, Jester, and then you go through to the end of the bittering hops, which is the Pilgrim and the Target, which always smell ripe, because they are generally very ripe by the time we pick them at the end of the season. But probably don't have that stringent aroma like the earlier ones do.

It is related to the Cannabis, so that's where the addictive qualities come from hops, I don't think it has that effect on me, I only like taking them in the beer.

Earliest memories would be school time and the old hop picking machine we had. The present one is the third one I remember in my lifetime, and the old one was the old ladies working on a skeleton crew and I used to go down there and plague them as a little boy, a little blonde bombshell pestering them. I used to get tied up in the sacks occasionally, when I was really naughty. But I suppose my first job in hop picking was driving the bine loader as any 16-year-old kid wants to do, drive tractors, and, yes, I used to drive the bine loader as soon as I was big enough to reach the pedals.

We're presently growing 12 different varieties, giving us not only a range of flavours but a range of the picking season, lengthening the picking season. Father used to only grow about four varieties in years gone by. And the way the market has changed recently, we're growing about 12 different varieties to give us a range of flavours and lengthening the season for picking as well.

Here in Ingestone we still one of the few that are using hop pockets. My plans are to change over to the modern system of bales. I think there's less packaging with the hop picking, with the hop pocket at the moment. We're still fairly traditional. This old hole here, there's still remnants of the old pocket, when they used to be tread in by hand, it was a much smaller hole in those days. And then of course we've upgraded to the push button press, electronically geared. I will have to catch up but it's what I'm set with at the moment. When there's plenty of money for reinvestment we'll move on to the bales.

Whereas the modern bale system, generally it's automatic-loading. We're still very labour intensive here. When the hops come off the kilns, they're tipped onto the cooling floor and then we use the scuppet to push the hops into the hole in the floor, where the pocket sits, and then we just press the button and the press pushes them in, firms them in. Depending on variety, the hop pocket generally takes between 8 or 12 presses 'til it's full, and then we take them out and sew them up on the horse. Once they're sewed up and we've ???? them, the merchant calls for them. So, whether they're stored here or in the barn or they go off straight on the lorry, as and when the merchant wants them.

I have no idea where these hooks come from. These hooks are for moving the hop pockets and are a family heirloom. I have no idea where these hooks came from. These are family heirlooms. These have been used as long as my lifetime and as a kid I remember my father using them. Although, this year we have yielded and put a new handle on this one. But that's the original handle on this one, but I can't tell you what wood it is. It looks like holly to me. But we just use that for when we use the hop pockets from the press here to the horse to sew them up. That's the only time

we use them. These are very old. We leave them hung right next to the station, where we sew the pockets up. And woe betide any student who loses them. I've had someone sew them into the top of a pocket. They've moved the pocket for me and left them inside the hops. So, they sewed the pocket up and then of course the next pocket, where are the hooks? We've had to go to the last pocket, untie it, get them out, sew back up again. So yeah, very valuable these hooks.

Well over the years the workforce has changed. I remember as a child it was mostly travellers, who would turn up, bring their caravans, camp on site. Then we went through a stage of trying to use undergraduates, we thought it would be an ideal time for students to earn a bit of money just before they back. Tied in nicely, took up most of September and we would finish beginning of October, by the time they started back at university. And that seems to have dried up now, and the difficulties of employing people for an intense period, and we need people on site every day, it's an intense job, it's got to be done and the need for people to do other things at the same time just didn't suit us. So now we use foreign nationals. We recruit from abroad. I seem to get on very well with a bunch of Romanians. They come over, do their six weeks hop picking and go back home happy. They probably earn enough in that period to keep them going for the rest of the year. They work very well and of course once they are here on site I don't have a problem with them running off to do other things, they are here to work and we get on with it.

Traditionally, many moons ago, in the days of handpicking, schools would generally start when hop picking had finished. The old headmaster would go round and ask the hop farmers when do you intend to finish, and that was basically was when they would start. Because not only would you import a lot of labour, the locals, it was good for them as well helping with the harvesting. Bishops Frome used to swell by over 5000 of people, just a small village like Frome. You know, that's how important hop picking and hop crop was to the area. Unfortunately, I have to take my kids to school when it's hop picking. I do remember when I was small I missed about three days to help with the hop picking instead of going back to school, but no, today they have to go,

Challenges I think are still the same, it's still the labour requirement. It's an intense period. Six weeks is a short period. So, no one's going to give up longer job to come and help. So, labour requirements are still there. And the onerous task of red tape is always there, no matter what we do. If we can't have the chemicals to grow the crop, if we can't have the staff to grow the crop, or we simply have a food-based problem, HACCP or something like that, I can't see it stopping the crop entirely but I can see it will have a detrimental effect. It may come to a point where the hassle may not be worth the reward.

You talk about the old times and hops and the research station. We had Wye hops down in Kent, that did a lot of Government-based research, and we had Rosemont here in Herefordshire, both have since both closed down. We're lucky that we took the germ plasm in house, our own research. That gives us a line in the research we want done certainly in the breeding programme. I can safely say it's in good hands under the BHA and under the auspices of Peter Darby, we have a good breeding programme, we've had some very good varieties coming out recently. Of course, we have the aphid resistant hop, which is world renowned and unique, and we should be very proud of that. Our wilt resistant programme and our powdered mildew resistance programme is second to none. And we're even doing research work the plant breeding on more up to date things like winter chill periods, milder winters. Some varieties like a colder time and struggling in the spring. And we're now crossing the South African varieties, where there's obviously very mild winters, they don't have frost, and our breeding programme can get round that and help us in the future if needs be.

Of course, of all the ploughing matches, the national is the one to win, that's the big one and really does catch the eye of the brewers. It's run by the IBD and yes that's the one we all need to win, plus the cups are bigger, so that helps! So, taking hops for a show, we are using a traditional cut sample from the side of the pocket or the bale. They are cut to their cube, wrapped in blue paper. The blue paper is very expensive, very important, because you mustn't let daylight get into the sample, it will change the colour of the hops. So, special thick paper so daylight can't get in, pinned down and then on show day they will be opened out just before judging.

Whether there is a sense of family I don't know. There are so few hop growers now that basically everyone knows each other's business. So, I wouldn't say we are all best buddies but when the times are good we got on very well and I dare say when the times go bad and the price drops we might all be trying to undercut each other!

Traditionally hops were grown all over the country and certainly in 1711 when the hop tax came in that narrowed it down to the two areas of the West Midlands and the South East, the two best growing areas maintained it. And I think it's mostly the rain shadow from the Black Mountains and our heavier type soils that makes much better for us to grow. I think the Theme Valley has a wonderful top soil and nice and deep and that's why they've succeeded, and the Frome valley, has the heavier clay and attributed to surviving the drought a bit better. But yes, I think it's the climate as much as anything that has made these two areas a stronghold of hop growing still.

This year's harvest has been ok. For the West Midlands, it's

been fair to middling, some places good. The south east has had a terrific crop this year. I think our drought here in the West Mids. just went on that little bit too long into early July. Could have done with a bit more rain earlier. But, no, I'm very pleased with this year's crop. It's kept us very busy for six weeks.

Evaluation: I think it's very important this historical element of hop growing. Primarily because for hop growing that has declined so much, and changed so much over the years, we are getting to the stage now when we are losing a generation. Where it was community led because of the hand picking. And basically, industrialisation completely changed the face of hop growing because of the invention of the picking machine. And that was led by, not because there was a shortage of pickers, it was led by technology transfer basically. But it did kill of that sense of solidarity. But we are getting to a stage now where we are losing that generation who still remember hand picking. It's a bit like 15, 20 years ago we still had the people who remembered fighting in the first world war. But we've lost them now. I don't think there's any left now. And we're losing that now, the generation that remember hand picking, and we're just about to lose them. And what you're doing is so important. There's a few of us still sticking to the old traditional ways but I'm afraid to say I'm going to have to change and change needs to be recorded.

Why grow hops? Well that's easy, hops have always been here. It's what I've been brought up with so I'm conditioned in that respect. I still find them a challenge every year when you're growing them and that's the challenge about hops. And of course, the smell, it is addictive. You just absolutely love it. And I'm pleased to be in it because what would I be doing if I wasn't hop growing. I don't know. I'd be struggling to be farming to be honest.

To watch the complete interview and others, please visit:
www.herefordshirelifethroughalens.org.uk