Title:	Probert, John_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, hop fire, hop awards

---

Identifier:	Probert, John_Interview_Complete
Interview Date:	September_5_2017
Location:	Church House Farm, Weston Beggard, UK
Source:	Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee:	John Probert (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:	5.86 GB
Duration:	27 min 46 seconds

Type:	Audio
Audio Format:	MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate:	44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate:	256 kb/s
Stereo/Mono:	Mono
File Size:	51.2 MB

Duration:	27 min 46 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 John Probert and I've lived in Weston Beggard all my life and I've been growing hops all my life, ever since I left school at 15, and grew them obviously with my father. And now we've gone on a generation and I'm fading away now and Tom has taken over. I was born up on what we call the Worcester Road, the Purlbrook Farm, where my cousin is now. At the age of four I moved down to where we are now, Church Farm, because father wanted to do hop growing and his two younger brothers, who were farming here at Church Farm, weren't making a very good job of it. And father said to the agent, would you like to swap over? And he agreed. Whether that's a good thing for me or not I don't know, because my cousin has a good lifestyle without hop growing!

I've still got vivid memories of the bus loads that used to come from Dudley up in the Black Country and there were people from Nantyglo, which is one of the Welsh valley mining towns and we also had gypsies so we had a good mix of people, who got on quite well until Saturday night came and they all piled into the New Inn up on the main road and various fights broke out, I can remember being told about. It was interesting times because of how many people were here. You know it's a tremendous difference now with the machine. And they used to pick into what we called cribs, which was a wooden thing with a cloth hanging in it and they used to pick the hops in there. And then the man used to come along with two or three people and bushel the hops and a bushel was how they were paid. And I can remember it was eleven pence ha'penny. And each year they would go on strike after the first day. And it was below my bedroom window that the negotiating was done at the back door up at the old Vicarage where father lived. And he said, 'I'll give you a shilling a bushel, but you can have a different bushler', because father used to do the bushelling. And then they wouldn't have that. So he usually won the day and they stopped on eleven pence ha'penny.

Most bushlers used to dip into the hops into the crib and upright their bushel and they could see exactly how much…. father used to straight into the hops and straight into the sack without up righting the bushel and they could see a fair way down the bushel because it wasn't upright and they thought they were getting a good deal. Which they were probably, to be fair, but….and then these hops were put from the bushel into a great big sack and eight bushels made a sackful and then the sack was

tied and carried out onto the headland?? Put onto what we call trailer ready to go into the kilns to be dried. They wanted my father to bushel because he never used to tip the bushel up because some of the bushlers would put it upright and push their hands onto the hops to press them into the bushel a bit more. There was always this dispute on bushling.

When they weren't working the woman would usually be cooking on open cookers and they were called devils, these big things full of coke. And that was quite a thing all the cooking and the washing, yeah, camaraderie.

It was very much labour intensive. There would be on a small farm like this there would be a couple of hundred of people in them figures. It would be usually be the lady and the children, the men would still be at work and they would come down at weekends, mostly, except the gypsies. And they were on site here with their caravans. Jeremiah Smith is the name that I can remember, the headman of the gypsies. What he said went, it was the law. (RE MINGLING BETWEEN GROUPS) yeah, they weren't too bad but they kept themselves to themselves gypsies.

Luckily, when I left school aged 15 or 16, father bought the Brough hop picking machine because I could see myself being the bushler you see, so there was a vast change in the way we did hop picking, it became mechanised overnight having a hop picking machine. you went from 200 people down to about 20. And he was one of the first people in 1955 to have a hop picking machine. The Brough works over at Suckley were flat out from the early fifties to the mid-seventies making hop picking machines. We used to have quite a few visitors come to look the first couple of years, people who haven't bought one, just running an eye over it.

It sounds like a lot of romance about this hand picking but the reality is it was a lot of hard work so it was a good move. It's the same of the romance watching the thrashing machine. If you have a look at a bine of hops, all those hops have to be picked individually into the crib, and a good hop picker would only do eight bushels a day and the machine will do that in a minute. And that's the sort of comparison. And then hop drying is another big thing. Kilns are everywhere in Herefordshire and the south east and they were cone-shaped to try and get draughts up through them to dry them before the days of fans and things. And hops go into a kiln roughly 80 per cent moisture and they've got to be dried down to roughly ten per cent. So there's a lot of water to come off in the drying process, which takes about ten hours per kiln, so that's a very fuel intensive job again and you've got to get it just right. If you above ten per cent, say you went to eleven or twelve, they'll go mouldy in what we call the bales now. And they're useless then.

I used to call it my museum because they are that ancient,

because there's a lot of history in those kilns going back three or four hundred years, and they work perfectly alright, but unfortunately, two years ago at half past two in the morning everything went up in flames and because it was so tinder dry and wood everywhere, it was all burnt out within an hour. For one of the hop heaters playing up, I got a big spark or whatever. Luckily, we hunted around, and I got on well with Charles Pudge at the bottom of Bishops Frome, which is next to the Hop Pocket, which is quite well known, and Charles' is the first farm this side. And his kilns were redundant and he couldn't have been more helpful. So we went back to the sacks and took then on our grain trailers down there and used his kilns. otherwise we could have been in a mess but he couldn't have been more helpful. So we only lost that day's pick in the fire and the insurance covers that so…. (After that) we got a brand-new set up and it's working well. The hop machine used to be up at this end and Tom moved that last summer, split it into three and it was quite an operation to take it down the road. And my wife said, crikey, all that work and nobody filmed it. He'd made an axle for one end and a man or two on the other and they were weaving it down the road! It's quite a big chunk of a machine a third of it is like. And he did well and got it bolted all up together. Of course all the old Brough men are dead now or past it, so he got no body to help him who would have known how to put a machine together. So he did well on that front and it seems to be working well at the moment.

I used to go down to an old mining town called Gethygair?? in mid Wales and I'd get a gang from there and if you could get them up here once they were up here they would sort of stop but they weren't as reliable as you would have liked. It was hard work employing that sort of labour. So we've evolved now with the rest of the agricultural community in having foreign labour. We've got a Polish lad, he's been coming ten years now, he's a farmer's son from Poland on a small farm, and he takes hop picking time off and he'll come a week before and he'll stop a week after helping, and he brings his friends and relatives and that's how our staff is. He's a damn good foreman as well…. if one or two of them can't speak English he will tell them in Polish what they should be doing. It works well. Martin has been working on and off for 40 or 50 years. He came here as a student, he's from by Cardigan and he's one of these unique people who thinks it's a privilege to be asked to be asked to come hop picking: 'thank you very much for asking me! I love to get my feet on the hop ground!' It's quite funny. We call him the gentle giant because he is six feet odd and all muscle. You wouldn't want to fall out with Martin. And we've also got the two men hanging bines on today are the two men who do the stringing in the hop yard in the summer, March and April, where we use four tonnes of wound coconut from Ceylon, Sri Lanka, and we use four tonnes of that every year. It's wound into balls, bit bigger than a football like.

The hop is known as a perennial, it goes dormant in the winter and then come the end of March/April, it decides, with the day light hours and the warmer temperatures, it decides to grow, and there'd be as many as fifty shoots on one root. And there's four strings to each root and each string you put two or three of these we call them wires, bines, up each, and that is very labour intensive but we're lucky that those two boys and their families, and they do it all, that are hanging on they don't mind working on weekends, which is a big bonus, because the hop, once it starts to grow it doesn't wait for anybody. It will grow from nothing to fifteen foot in a couple of months. And it will only go clockwise, whereas a kidney bean will only go anti clockwise.

Tom was undecided on the hop job and I said once or twice, make up your bloody mind one way or the other, we can get them out or whatever. Anyway, he's converted to hops now and he's really keen on the job, because it's no good being 90 per cent keen on hop growing you've got to be a hundred per cent. Because every year is different growing, all these little things that come in, because they're prone to what we call powdery mildew, downy mildew, hop damson aphid fly comes in every year at the end of May and will breed by the million. This year it did breed by the million, so you've got to spray for that, spray for the red spider mite. Tom was lucky enough to go to New Zealand and he was working on a hop farm in the hop harvest for two years running, they invited him back for a second year. And out there they don't get any mildews and very little disease. Must be isolated New Zealand! If you're from a farming background, travelling round New Zealand, he soon acquired himself a small motorbike, and you could drop in on any farm more or less, and they will find you a job if you are willing to do whatever. And he said he was driving what he said was a worn out combine and forever repairing it and on his travels it was just the hop harvest season and he dropped in on this hop farm and the machine was basically the same as ours, a Brough but it was on stop and they didn't seem to have much idea of how to repair it, so he said to the boss man, 'do you want a hand repairing it?' and he obviously said yes, if you know about this. And he helped them repair it and the boss bloke said, do you want a job for two or three weeks? And he said, yeah, I don't mind. Well you can look after this bloody thing! Which he did and it just worked out really tidy.

It's inbred to you to grow hops perhaps and I wouldn't know how to do anything else. I've done it all my life. And the beauty of a hop crop is you can keep learning something every year different. Anyone who says they know it all, know nothing in my opinion.

The hop is a different crop to anything else. It seems to have this romance about it. And there's only fifty odd left in the country, 25 in the southeast, whereas when I left school there'd

be a thousand hop growers. And they were wiped out mainly to a deadly fungal disease called verticillium wilt, you quite often see a big notice on gateways, do not enter. That came into Herefordshire in the 1970s. It had lurked about in Kent earlier than that. And they also had an outbreak at the experimental farm at Rosemond and they completely exterminated the hop yard, took the lot down and laid it down to grass and cured it that way. We've still got a bit of wilt. We use a rotation system. When it gets that bad we'll take the lot out and grass the patch down for two or three years and grass will get rid of wilt more or less. And there are varieties that will put up with wilt better than others.

We have what we call a hop agent who is our go between between us and the hop merchants who we sell to. And everything up to about 80 or 90 percent is forward sold. We've sold our hops now, a lot of them are 20/20 and that gives you confidence to grow them in cases of collapse in the market like. Because the Americans in their wisdom, because there was what we call a good spot market last year, that surplus hops were selling at a premium, higher than your forwarded contract hops, they will slap about 4000 acres in, which is more than our acreage in this country all together. And I haven't got the courage to tell them at the world hop conference, 'I do wish you Americans would do your arithmetic and not be so greedy on price, but if you are on a level playing field you will have a level price'. Whereas you're putting 4000 acres in it distorts the market a bit. They over supply simple as that, and as soon as you're on over supply they can tell you well, we'll pay you so much. That's why we do forward contracting because it's such an expensive crop to grow and you can't afford to make any mistakes and the man who is coming up tonight, he's been in the hop job all his life as a hop agent. They used to be called hop factors, don't know why, and they were the go between for us and the merchants. And the merchants are the people who supply the breweries. And there's three big merchants, Faram, who are local at Malvern, Stiner's Who are world-wide, they have a huge hop farm in America, and there's also Luprafesh?? And he's based in Kent.