

## Hop Picking

**“Owing to the number of girls absent in the country on holidays and hopping the attendance this week is low”**

*Extract from Pooles Park Girls' School Head teacher's Log 1907*

From the 16th century, Kent was an important centre for hop-growing. Hops are dried in oast houses before being used to make beer. By 1900 century, an estimated 250,000 men, women and children travelled to Kent each summer for the annual harvest.

Hops grow on flexible branches called bines, in fields traditionally called 'hop gardens'. The bines are grown along strings and wires attached to poles up to 12 feet (3.65 metres) high. Hops were harvested in late August and September. Picking began at dawn. The picked hops were put into large bins or baskets. First, the bine would be pulled down from the strings. It was then laid on the bin and the hops – which are the flowers of the plant – were stripped (picked) off. Pickers had to be careful not to drop leaves into the bins. Pickers could be paid anything from eight old pence to a shilling per bushel.

The bins were moved down the alleys during the course of the day. After lunch, children were often allowed to play in the fields while their parents continued working. Work usually finished around 4pm.

The harvest attracted many seasonal workers from London to Kent for the summer. Most of the workers were women who left their casual jobs in the City to work in the country for a few weeks. They brought their children, who were on school holidays, with them. Fathers who had work in London would often come to join their families at the weekend. Sometimes whole families moved to Kent for the summer, living in makeshift pickers' huts. Often these were made of corrugated iron, without electricity or running water. Cooking was over open fires in front of the hut, and water was collected from a pump or well. Pickers often brought their own bedding and cooking equipment with them.

After the Second World War, machines took over much of the work previously done by hand. With many jobs also beginning to offer paid holidays, the popularity of hop-picking holidays declined. By the 1960s, the annual migration from London for the hop-picking was all but over.