

Local History: Hop Growing in the Alton Area

'Of all the crops the farmer has to do with, this is the most interesting, causes him more anxiety, requires more attention, costs more to produce and perhaps oftener fails than any other, but at the same time no crop has paid so well.'

Journal of William Terrell Gunner, Will Hall Farm, 18 August 1850.

Hops were extensively grown in the Alton area for 200 years and used by the local breweries for their beer making, but virtually all of the hop gardens no longer exist.

The hop plant was formerly grown up tall poles set on small mounds called hills. Each hop garden may have contained many hundreds of hills with two or three poles to each hill and several hop bines to each pole. During the last quarter of the 19th century, systems of wirework, stringing and poles gradually replaced the traditional and less productive method of growing. Stilts were often worn to tie the strings to the tops of the poles.

In early spring the hop garden was manured using farmyard muck and woollen rags. The garden may have had a second manuring during the summer of guano, super phosphate or other fertiliser.

Throughout the growing season the ground was regularly hoed and weeded and sprayed against flies.

Hop picking usually began in the last days of August or early September. There was insufficient local labour hence large numbers of people, even whole families, migrated from London, Portsmouth and Southampton for the picking weeks. It was considered by some to be a paid holiday.



Gypsies and travellers made up a sizable proportion of hop pickers. They lived in caravans or benders and often returned year after year to the same hop garden. Local people considered the travellers were the cause of trouble:-

'Last night there was a most awful row among our Irish party. They fell out among themselves and fought like bulldog – men, women and children. They knocked each other down with hop poles and



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fought as if they would kill one another. The Police took charge and some and all who could left in the morning.'

Journal of William Terrell Gunner, 28 September 1850.

ARE YOU SAVED?

It was the spiritual welfare of the hop picker that most concerned the Hop Pickers Missions.

From the late 19th century the Rev Samuel Chinn of Alton and member of the London Missionary Society spent the picking weeks travelling around the hop gardens. Mission Tents were erected for prayer meetings whilst tea and evangelism were dispensed with equal enthusiasm. His book, *Among the Hop Pickers*, gives graphic details of the missionary work.

'Finished picking ... the average is over 500 bushels per acre. Thus the 2 acres of strings went 100 bushels over the average.'

Journal of William Terrell Gunner, 18 September 1867.

The freshly picked hops were taken to the kiln to be dried. They were spread over a hair cloth laid across the upper floor of the kiln. Hot air from the furnace beneath rose through the cloth to dry the hops. Until quite recently sulphur was added during drying to give the hops an even yellow colour.

Once the hops had cooled they were gently shovelled through a hole in the floor into a long cylindrical bag known as a hop pocket which hung from the ceiling of the room below. The hops were pressed into the pocket by a machine, although formerly this had been done by treading the hops down.

There were once numerous hop kilns to be seen around Alton. Many have since been demolished, but others survived in a disused state and have been converted to houses.