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## Introduction

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### '... into the hops'

*This is a history of entanglement: of the common hop, *Humulus lupulus*, with lives and locations; with livings made or struggled for; with localities linked with its name. When Ernest Wickham, nineteenth-century hop farmer, called 'out of the hay, and into the hops' to his workers, he signalled the abandonment of all other tasks, for the hops were ready, and must be picked immediately.<sup>1</sup> The subtext was one well understood across the centuries – hops took precedence. Only their sale could outshine returns from other crops and yield a relative fortune.*

**Humulus lupulus* is the ancestor of all cultivated varieties and is indigenous in Britain; archaeological evidence found it in Cambridgeshire around 3000 BC, and it has grown across the globe for centuries. Although common and wild hops are botanically indistinguishable, wild ones do exist here, and some of their properties have been used in breeding programmes. Those twining the hedgerows today may not truly be wild, because cultivated hops were once so widespread, and the pollen from the male hop flower disperses over considerable distances.<sup>2</sup>*

*The hop is a vigorous, perennial climbing plant. From ground level in spring it rapidly twists clockwise up supports by means of hooked hairs on its bine (climbing stem), reaching thirteen to fourteen feet by the end of June, and between twenty to thirty feet by early August.<sup>3</sup> The female flowers (called cones) grow on separate plants. Around about July, they may, or may not, be fertilised by the male pollen, but, either way, develop into hops. If pollinated, the incipient hops enlarge and develop seeds. The resulting seedlings, male or female, are always genetically unique because of the separation of the male and female flowers, and only propagation from cuttings ensures breeding true to type.<sup>4</sup> Kentish hops are traditionally seeded but, after 1971, some seedless varieties suitable for lager beer were cultivated.<sup>5</sup> Lupulin glands in the hop cones provide the characteristic tastes required by brewers: bitterness from alpha acid, also a preservative; and aroma and flavour, imparted by essential oils.<sup>6</sup>*

*Hops are singular in more than their genetic make-up. Needing more time, labour and overhead investment than any other crop, they materially affected the lives of the huge numbers of people who planted, cultivated, gathered and marketed them.<sup>7</sup> What*

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1. David Wickham, March 2000.
  2. R.A. Neve, *Hops* (London, 1991), pp. 25–8; A.H. Burgess, *Hops: botany, cultivation and utilization* (London, 1964), p. 19; Peter Darby, Hop Research Unit, Wye College, 9 October 1996.
  3. Burgess, *Hops*, pp. 22, 35.
  4. Peter Darby; Hop Research Unit, *Botany and propagation of hops*, student information sheet (Wye, undated); H.H. Parker, *The hop industry* (London, 1934), pp. 102–3.
  5. W.G.G. Alexander, *A farming century: the Darent Valley 1892–1992* (London, 1991), p. 127.
  6. The National Hop Association of England, *The guide to English grown hops* (London, 1996), p. 4.
  7. D.W. Harvey, 'Locational change in the Kentish hop industry and the analysis of land use patterns', in A.R.H. Baker, J.D. Hamshere and J. Langton (eds), *Geographical interpretations of historical sources: readings in historical geography* (Newton Abbot, 1970), p. 252.

other plant has had special trains laid on for its harvesters? Economic returns from them were so spectacularly uneven (because of their vulnerability to weather and pest damage) that bets were laid upon hop yields as well as upon the consequent hop duty.<sup>8</sup>

Whether for these reasons or for others, they have apparently always possessed a recognisable further significance. Ben Wright, a retired hop factor, was not alone in seeing them as 'special', and Margaret Lawrence described them as 'emotive', with a 'soul ... [which] has encircled the lives ... of Kentish people'.<sup>9</sup> The hop is entwined in Kent's cultural identity; a hop pole bore the flag of protesters against the New Poor Law at Hernhill in 1835.<sup>10</sup> The many nineteenth-century roundel oasts visible in Kent's countryside evoke the long association of the county with hops.

Hop pickers often vividly remember their encounters with hops. One elderly lady whom I met at a Beer and Hop Festival in Kent in 1996 came every year to pick again in the traditional way and relive her memories. George Orwell, who in 1931 joined down-and-outs in Trafalgar Square to walk into Kent for the hop picking, wrote about the tribulations of the work factually in *Hop-Picking* and fictionally in *A Clergyman's Daughter*.<sup>11</sup> For Dorothy (the daughter of the title) the experience, despite its downsides, held a magic which others felt in reality.<sup>12</sup> Recent hop pickers too have written and spoken of a special freedom and exhilaration, despite the hard labour.<sup>13</sup>

This book covers some 300 years of hop cultivation and marketing through the study of individual farms and hop traders. Relating specifically to the Kentish Weald and Southwark, it includes material about hop pickers, but is chiefly about the work and people involved in growing, drying and selling hops, and about change in this mode of agriculture over time and responses to such change. It assesses the place of hops within farm economies and hop growing in the context of other farm work, together with the evolution of hop trading in the Borough at Southwark, where many Wealden hops were sold, and the environment in which selling took place. It also views hops in the context of national and local hop cultivation, and in the light of wider events and issues such as war, rail travel and agricultural improvement, and, more specifically to the crop, the tithe and hop duty.

Handwritten farm books and hop-trading records contributed much to this account. The dried ink recalled another world, which was amplified by maps, plans, newspapers and journals, tithe files, trade directories and literary and other sources.

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8. G. Clinch, *English hops: a history of cultivation and preparation for the market from the earliest times* (London, 1919), pp.56–7.
  9. Ben Wright, April 1998; M. Lawrence, *The encircling hop. a history of hops and brewing* (Sittingbourne, 1990), preface, paragraph 6.
  10. B. Reay, *The last rising of the agricultural labourers: rural life and protest in nineteenth-century England* (Oxford, 1990), p.77.
  11. G. Orwell, 'Hop-picking', in S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds), *The collected essays, journalism and letters of George Orwell. Volume 1 an age like this 1920–1940* (London, 1968), pp.52–71; G. Orwell, *A clergyman's daughter* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp.85–123.
  12. Orwell, *Clergyman's daughter*, pp.97, 105.
  13. For example see G. O'Neill, *Pull no more bines. An oral history of east London women hop pickers* (London, 1990), part of photograph caption opposite p.77.

*Oral histories were invaluable. Among those who generously took time to tell me about their work or research were John and Mollie Rummery, hop farmers from the 1950s; the late Frederick Farley, skilled hop cultivator; and David Wickham, who made available and expanded upon family hop-cultivation records and, with his wife, Ann, extended much kind hospitality. Stephen Wickham showed me around his hop farm at the start of my research and again in 2006, when hops were gone and the farm was given over to set-aside and horses. Ben Wright recounted his work as a hop factor; Peter Darby described hop research at Wye College. Their contribution was enormous and I thank them.*

*Chapter 1 describes the contribution of land structure and early settlement to the development of hop cultivation in Wealden Kent and hop marketing in the Borough. Chapter 2 investigates hop cultivation in differing circumstances from its early days through to Biddenden Farm in 1860 on the eve of the repeal of hop duty. Late-nineteenth-century hop farming in the aftermath of agricultural depression is the subject of Chapter 3, along with innovations of the time. The 'curse of drink' was an issue then, as was the poverty of farm labourers. Chapter 4 discusses the ongoing national and local falls in hop acreage and changes to hop farming after the Second World War, while Chapter 5 tells of the build-up, and later decline, of the enclave of hop factors and hop merchants in the Borough; of their links to Kent, their work and the buildings they occupied; and of the new competitive trading. The records of Arthur Morris & Company provide a unique window upon the work of nineteenth-century hop merchants. Chapter 6 looks at the processes of tithe commutation in various Wealden parishes, and at the repeal of hop duty, through the John Nash scrap book.*