



HOP PICKING IN OUR FAMILY HISTORY



HOP PICKING LIFE

It is impossible for us to really understand the interlude that hop picking had in the life of Londoners. It wasn't an easy life and as the prices for hops fell in the 1950's, the pay was low. But, good or bad, thousands regularly left their homes in London for the Kent hop fields. A holiday? A change of scenery? A chance to earn a few extra pennies? The opportunity for the children to enjoy fresh air and green grass? The reasons are as many and varied as the people who went.

HOPPER HUT

Accommodation in the hopper huts was basic even for the East Enders. I have no doubt if they were asked they would have replied that, "A change is as good as a 'oliday!" The first job for the transplanted Londoners was to fill large sacking with straw for mattresses. Toilets were outside and bathing was of the tin tub variety {this may not have been so different from what they left behind) Most huts were made out of corrugated iron which meant cold nights and hot days. Mum said that some women took a few "specials" with them to make it more like home. A little bit of wallpaper, left over curtain material provided them with the illusion of home comforts.



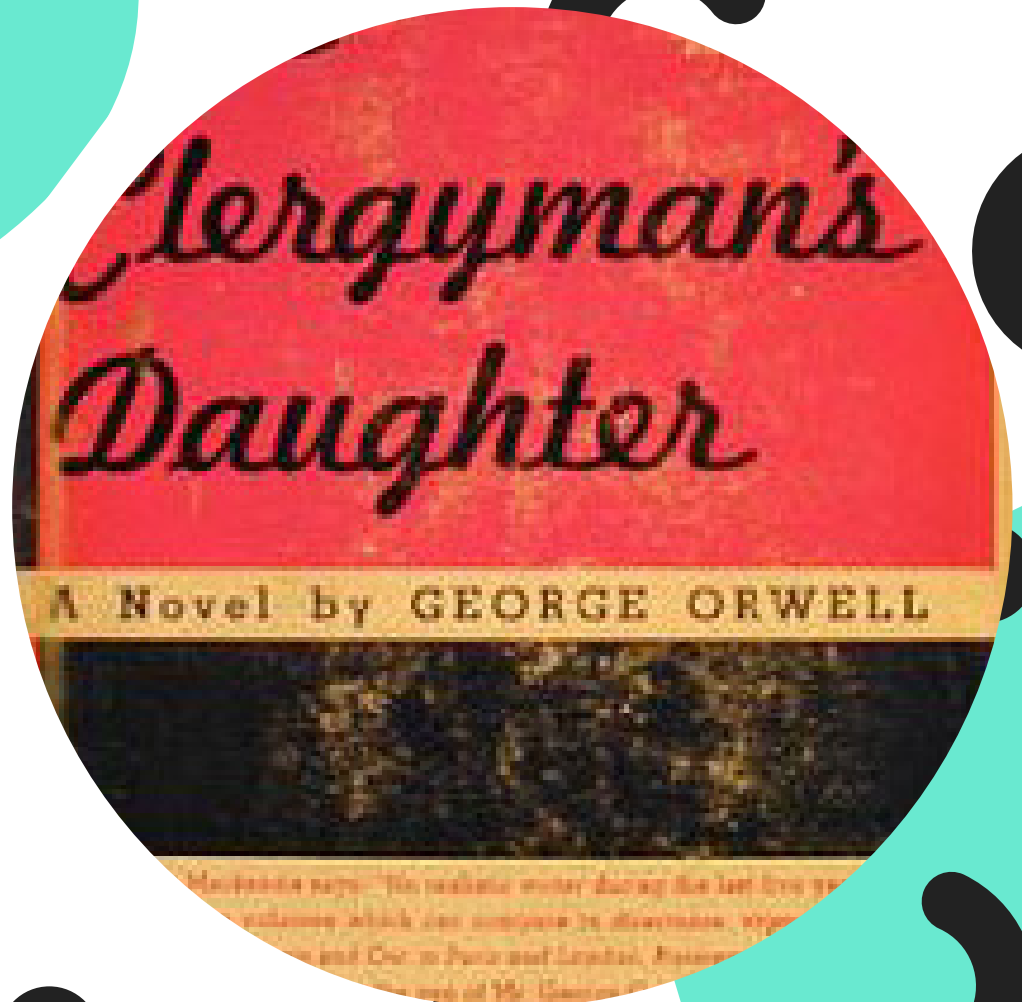
THE HOPPER SPECIAL

For the thousands of East Enders who made the annual pilgrimage the choices of how to get there was either in a special train or open backed army trucks. The necessities of life needed for the Kent hop fields were packed into old prams and boxes or stuffed into the back of trucks with a child sitting on each as a mark of ownership. The "special" was a little more upmarket as you can see by the clothes they are wearing on the platform.



HOP PICKING & GEORGE ORWELL

I hasten to write that George Orwell is not part of my family history. Many years ago I read his book "The Clergyman's Daughter" As a political writer he wanted to make sure that his understanding of a hop pickers life was told in a true and fair manner. To do this he spent time as a hop picker in Kent. Apparently he was not happy with the story so publishing was restricted to paper back





JOBS FOR THE MEN

In keeping with the times there was no such thing as a "binwomen" If a man from the city was in casual employment this was his opportunity to gain an extended period of employment. His job description was,

"To be in the hop garden in the morning at the time appointed, and not to leave the hop garden during working hours without consent. To furnish hops to the bins. To look after the pickers and require them to pick their hops well and to see that all hops are picked up from the ground.

HOP PICKING ON STILTS

What a sight it must have been for the youngest hop pickers to see these giants walking around the fields! Their work began long before the "Hopper Special" arrived. Setting up the fields for the vines to grow up was a skilled job the men could count on each season. When the vines were ready for picking the strings were cut to tumble down to the women & children waiting below.

