

WELFARE OF THE HOP PICKERS

Peter Gillies

When, some years ago, I started giving magic lantern shows I concentrated on agricultural and rural subjects, especially in the south east of England. The attraction was a natural one because, having spent my whole working life on farms, it was a subject which rarely required too much research – the subjects and explanations tended to be second nature to me.

One exception to this which soon came to light was the phenomenon of 'missions'. I was never aware of any missions coming to my home area of south London in the school holidays. The nearest I got to it was a day out provided by the local Sunday School that took me to a nearby rural spot where there were boats on a lake, large woodland areas, open fields and a picnic. I was in heaven.

One day a slide of a caravan, parked in a barn with a friendly-looking gent standing beside it, joined my collection. I guessed it was somewhere in Kent because all the other slides acquired with it were Kent based. The van itself, covered with religious sayings, also provided me with a clue. It certainly wasn't the local grocer delivering the week's groceries. One word there, 'Maranatha', was definitely not part of my vocabulary but I understand it is generally interpreted as 'Come Lord' and used as 'Alleluia' would be.

Kent, of course, was renowned for growing hops and I soon learnt enough about the slide to include it in the show and speculate: "I can't be certain but I think this man is a preacher who has come to entertain the hoppers and he almost certainly has a magic lantern in the back of his wagon" (Fig. 1). After one show an old man came up to me and said: "You were absolutely right about the man with the caravan. He was older than me but we worked together for a while. His name was Andrew Bloxham and he was a retired merchant seaman. We were both working for the Open Air Mission (OAM)". I immediately asked what that was and he replied "Not was, but is".

The organisation began in 1853 when a London solicitor happened to witness the mass of people waiting for a public hanging – these were not abolished until 1868. He realised that 'hanging crowds' could provide him with a ready-made audience to spread the word of God. All he needed was a box to stand on. The idea spread to anywhere that crowds gathered, such as Epsom races, the Derbyshire Well Dressings and many other venues – and, of course, hop picking.

The ingredients for violent outbursts among hoppers were many and varied. Characters from the East End of London were corralled



1. Andrew Bloxham with the Open Air Mission caravan

together, frequently alongside local travellers. With tempers on a short fuse, and maybe too much alcohol, trouble was never far away. The children, in their new rural situation which offered fresh opportunities for mischief and adventure, also presented a problem. The preacher was completely independent and maintained an authoritative and respected presence. He alone was able to act as arbitrator in disputes, whilst offering entertainment to occupy the unruly youngsters. The farmers loved it – and best of all the service was free. As a result the OAM did not bother with horses for their caravans as the farmers considered moving them when required was a small price to pay for peace and harmony.

My informant added that my presumption about the magic lantern was also absolutely right. It was a basic component of every preacher's equipment. The lantern provided both an educational resource and pure entertainment. There were many other missions active around that time (see Figs 2 and 3). The Wesleyans were one group who no doubt visited the hop gardens. The Church Army Lantern Department, a little later, were also clearly well prepared, although I am not sure they ever took their cinema (Fig. 4) to the hop fields.

An act of welfare born from commercial realism was the practice of paying the pickers with tokens issued by individual farms and valid only in pre-arranged shops. This provided considerable security from theft and an assured welcome increase in trade for the local shops. The farmers, usually suffering from cash flow problems, could arrange free credit with the shop until the crop was sold, which could be up to three months later. The pickers were able to receive a weekly pay packet without the risk of being tempted to fritter away the money, possibly in the local public house. The head of the family (usually the mother) was generally intent on returning to London with a nest egg to see the family through the coming winter. The bare minimum was paid each week with the balance paid in cash when the crop was finally picked and the families left for home.



2. The Wycliffe Protestants with the lantern ready on the tailboard



3. Mission helpers came in many forms. A local preacher with hymn books in the basket? (Lester Smith Collection)



4. The congregation here look too well dressed for hoppers but no doubt the van is ready and waiting



5. Travellers brought their own accommodation (Lester Smith Collection)

6. (right) Eventually farmers provided 'hopper huts' for the Londoners. One door equals one family



7. Hoppers Hospital with a nurse on the left and mother with patient in the centre

Hops have been grown in Kent since the mid-16th century, picked originally by local people with homes in the area and travellers providing their own tents and caravans (Fig. 5). The size of the crop increased and by the mid-19th century Londoners with few resources joined the annual pilgrimage to Kent to join the estimated 80,000 migrant hoppers. The living conditions for them ranged from 'rough' to 'appalling' with improvements slow in coming. Many farmers did provide very basic facilities with workers sleeping under canvas – initially ex-Army bell tents. Later farmers constructed 'hopper huts' made from wood and sometimes corrugated iron (Fig. 6). Brick huts appeared once the brick tax was abolished in 1850. The structures were very rudimentary but provided better protection during rainy periods and were used for only a few weeks when generally the weather was benign. For many this was the nearest they had to a holiday so there were few complaints. The families sometimes brought distemper or a roll or two

of wallpaper to cheer the place up. This was an annual task as the winter damp soon softened the distemper or weakened the glue, leaving a blank canvas for improvements the following year.

Medical attention was another matter. In 1898 Father Richard Wilson, from St Augustine's, Stepney, in London's East End, grew tired of finding his congregation drastically reduced each September. He decided to follow them down to experience first hand the attraction of Kent's farms. He was shocked. The charity which he formed immediately rented a cottage in Five Oak Green, near Tonbridge, and set up the Little Hoppers Hospital. In 1910 he acquired a disused public house, The Rose and Crown, in the same village and set up The Hoppers Hospital (Fig. 7). This served until 1960 when hop picking was in severe decline. The premises are still owned by the same charity and provide family holidays for East Enders from London who are unable to afford a get-away break.