

MEMORIES OF HOP PICKERS 1937

Diana 'Dickie' Olivier (1915 – 2008)

A note on the writer: 'Dickie' was the daughter of the painter Sir William Orpen.

She was at the Byam Shaw School of Art when she went, aged 22, to the Kent hop-gardens to draw the hop-pickers. She was young and slight and fearlessly alone.

Hop-picking was considered to be a working holiday by the East End Londoners who were engaged as hop-pickers. An escape in late summer from the smog of London to the fresh air and fields of rural Kent.

Setting off for the Kentish hop-gardens, my first impression was of villages under siege. Beleaguered shops with wooden fencing across the counters. Post mistresses peering through very small slits. I don't know how real the threat was to the locals by the invasion of Londoners and gypsies, or whether it was due to a folk-memory of dastardly deeds done long ago.

Reading the local papers after a week or two, when a sprinkling of malefactors had come up before the Beak, did make me realize some skullduggery took place. Certainly, I was thought foolhardy to be abroad with only a drawing book and a 2B pencil.

Walking into a farm near Paddock Wood, the overseer (on horseback, armed with a gun and a huge whip) came to a halt beside me and said: "Hi! You aren't going in there on your own?" "Yes", I said, "Without a horse? No gun?". "No", I said. "It's on your own head and I'm not coming in to rescue you. Don't say I didn't warn you!".

The picking was nearly finished. The pickers were all from London, nearly all from Hoxton – still, in those days, the residential area for pickpockets – and they nearly killed me with their kindness.

I could only draw with great difficulty as the press of spectators pinned my arms to my sides. They insisted on who I should draw – hence, 'the two wust boys in Hoxton' – both very stiff, and proud and self-conscious.

In wet weather, the picking went on for weeks, and the large black cooking pots held – as each week went by – a richer, darker mix: pigeons and rabbits and hedgehogs, and any root vegetables that could be dug up. The generosity was overwhelming and I was often offered a share, but I had to lie a lot when the smell became too pungent to be borne.

In wet weather, and sleeping in cowsheds, their rheumatics – 'the screws' – were exacerbated. One cause for wrath was the old woman who, at four o'clock in the morning, would wake everybody, shouting "Where's me bloody boots?". "Why can't she go to bed in her boots? Must know what 'er bloody bladder's like – must do".

A small gypsy girl – after she had shown me the beautiful family caravan – stood on the steps of the caravan bragging to an admiring circle of six-to-ten-year-old Eastenders: "We 'as as much bread to eat as we wants – and rabbit" - and then, with a look of seraphic bliss – "and I once 'ad a sorsage!". There were murmurs of astonished disbelief and envy at the thought of this celestial fare.

This little girl, Maria, slept in the lower bunk with her big teenage sisters, Phoebe and Delilah. She said, rather proudly: "when we makes too much noise, dad shuts the door on us".

Their bunk was no more than a cupboard, and dad and mum and baby Harry and little Tom slept above them in an elegant alcove with a frill around the opening and a lace-curtained rear window.

One day I was drawing a nine-year-old boy holding his brother, who was only a few months old. He kept joggling the poor thing up and down. I said: "Don't joggle him like that". He said, "Why?". I replied, "You'll give him hiccups". So he stopped and I finished the drawing. A bit later, I heard a noise like an approaching riot – raised voices of men, women and children, but hidden from view by the curtaining nares of the hop bines. I was quite frightened until they bust into view headed by the boy carrying the baby. He was shouting: " 'E's got 'em, miss, 'e's got 'em. I said: " Who's got what?". " The 'iccups, miss - like you said 'e would". Applause and congratulations - I had become a medicine woman, and embarrassingly famous. I was asked to treat all manner of ailments: I was confronted with spots and indigestion, with grandma's hammertoe – and what would be the best for Ernie's piles?

A fellow art student, Camilla Alexander, told me of a farmer who employed real 'Egyptians for his hop-picking, i.e. full Roms or Romanies. He did so to be sure there would be no fighting. Mixing 'diddicoys' (who are gipsies with only a small amount of Romany blood) with true Roms only meant trouble. Nor was it wise to mix London 'hoppers' with any type of gypsy.

So Camilla and I went to draw the 'Egyptians. They were a wonder to behold: the women in conical black hats and antiquated corsets that created long-waisted, high-busted – almost Stuart – shapes. Their hair was blue/black, coiled into intricate patterns, or hieratical corkscrew curls. They had high cheekbones and dark eyes but with surprisingly Saxon flaxen-haired children with sloe-berry eyes staring at one through tussocks of honey-coloured hair.

The young men combined fierceness with great indolence. Most of them were convinced it would be dangerous to them if I kept any of my drawings, thinking that the captured image might cause themselves to wilt or fade. Others had less alarming fears: that my drawings were in some ways photographs and they might therefore see themselves on the screen at the local Odeon.

All through that long hot day, we were aware of two blond young men - possibly from a university mission to the hop fields. They were preaching, somewhat self-consciously, to the silent audiences. One could hear them in the cool parallel cloisters of the hop-bines, but one was also aware of the silence following their departure – a contained hostility, punctuated by considerable throat-clearing and hawking and spitting. In fact no overt display of feeling - that is, until five o'clock, when we were all gathered around the gates in a big semi-circle. The two blond men appeared - and then four tall young gypsy men came forward, and, with two on each man, lifted them up and laid them into each of two long sacking containers, then closed the tops, and, with great deliberation, swung both loads round and round three or four times before finally laying them on the ground. The young preachers – by this time, blinded by the hop dust, dizzied and choking with hop debris in their nostrils and throats – were gently lifted to their feet and pushed firmly towards the exit. Nothing was said. No murmur from the crowd. It was this absence of violence, or voice, that made the whole performance so deeply chilling and fearful.

All that long summer day we had been absorbed in drawing amongst the rococo convolutions of the bines – the sunlight dappling and chequering hands and heads. We were only half-aware of the disconcerting parabolas of spittle that the disapproval of the blond young men and their nice cultured Christianity. And then the day ended abruptly with this ice-cold display.

On my last, very hot, afternoon, I travelled home in a 'Hop-pickers' Special' train. The fare was very low, but it meant an interminable journey as the train was often pushed into sidings to allow

the 'real' trains to keep to their timetable. The train was crowded, with windows blocked by bodies. I was sitting next to a voluminous woman and opposite an equally mountainous female. A rather waily small boy kept climbing over me to say to the lady beside me: "Oh, gimme a suck, mum, gimme a suck". He must have been between two and three years old (mum just elbowed him back onto my lap). "Keep orf, young Edward, if yer thirsty go an ask yer dad for a drop of beer". I was entranced at the thought of beer as an alternative to mother's milk. And astonished when young Edward squeezed past the projecting knees and parcels and banged on his dad's back. Dad drew out a bottle of beer and calmly tipped half the contents down young Edward's throat. Edward swiftly came back to us, and, wonderfully inebriated, spent the next hour picking - with drunken precision - the spots off ma's frock and then placing them very carefully on Aunt Edie's vast area of striped frock. He fell into a deep sleep until we finally rattled into Charing Cross. Where we disentangled ourselves - truly gummed together with hop-dust and heat, beer, sweat and tears.

'Dickie' Olivier, Kent, late summer 1937.