

THE FARNHAM WHITEBINE HOP

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The Farnham Whitebine hop was once considered the finest of the English hops and for many years commanded the highest price. Although these hops are no longer grown in their home town, plants originally propagated from Farnham Whitebines are still grown as part of the Goldings group.

According to John Aubrey, writing in 1673, hops were first grown in Farnham in 1597:

About this town are hops in as great plenty as in any part of England if not greater. Old Mr Bignell's father was the first that planted hops here. Which husbandry he brought out of Suffolk 76 years hence: and ever since they have planted larger quantities; so that now about this town are no less than 300 acres of hopyards.¹

Richard Bradley, writing in 1729, again shows that Farnham was an important hop growing area:

I should have been more particular concerning the building of the hop-kiln but there are so many of them to be seen about Canterbury and Farnham that everyone may be easily satisfied of their structure.²

He provides no details of specific hop varieties being grown, saying instead:

Most of the hop planters make three sorts of hops, one of them they name the good or master hop, or the manured or garden hop. The other they call the unkindly hop, and some call this the Fryer, others call it the male hop, but without reason. The third sort is that which they call the wild hop, and some likewise call this the savage.³

We now know hops do in fact have male and female

plants, and it's quite possible the 'wild hops' were indeed wild hops with low brewing quality.

Hop varieties were first named for the character of their cones, e.g. Long White, Oval, Long Square Garlick; or by the colour of their bines, e.g. White Bine, Green Bine, Red Bine.⁴ Later on they came to be named after their grower or where they were grown.

Early hop varieties will have originated from landraces, and genetic analysis shows that 'at least two populations existed in ancient times and the hops cultivated in England originated from or are related to both populations'.⁵

The most prized of the Farnham hops was the Farnham Whitebine which was first grown in the middle of the eighteenth century:

Around 1750 a new strain of hop was introduced to the Farnham growers by a Mr Peckham Williams of Badshot Place, Badshot Lea (a small village in the parish of Farnham). This was a White Bine Grape hop, and was to become famous as the Farnham White Bine, which would be grown in the Farnham hop grounds until the disastrous inter-war years, when the blight hit so badly the growers changed to another variety.⁶

Whitebine hops in fact have a pale green bine, and 'Grape' refers to how the hop cones grow in bunches.

Propagating cuttings from the best plants, or plants with desirable characteristics, has for centuries been how most hops are grown commercially as there is great genetic variation in hops, and seedlings are very seldom like the parents.



*Figure 1. Cones of the Mathon Whitebine variety photographed in 2011 at the National Hop Collection.
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When writing about hop growing in Farnham Frederick Shoberl recorded that the Farnham Whitebine was grown from a cutting:

Several varieties of hops are here grown; but the best, and that which is cultivated to the greatest extent, is the whitebine grape-hop, which was first raised from a single cutting about fifty years ago by Peckham Williams, Esq. of Badshot Place, near Farnham, who would never suffer any other sort to be grown on his plantation, which is still kept up by that alone.⁷

Unlike Mr Golding⁸ or Mr Fuggle⁹ it's clear cut who Mr Williams was, and some sources even accord him a similar honour by naming the hop after him: William's White Bine.¹⁰ My brief research has revealed he was born in Chichester 1712, inherited the estate at Badshot Lea in 1734, and died in Rumboldswyke in 1785.^{11,12} A wealthy gentleman he was at one time the Sheriff of Sussex and there even exists a portrait from 1731 of 'Peckham Williams, esq'.¹³ He was not alone in holding

his hop in high regard and for a long time Farnham Whitebines were the most prized hops in Britain and they attracted a premium price: 'The Farnham hops generally fetch one-third more, and sometimes double those of other districts'.¹⁴ Quite why this was the case was the cause of much speculation by William Stevenson in 1809, and the quality of the hop variety was only part of the reason:

It cannot be ascribed to the particular variety of hop which is cultivated at Farnham ... cuttings from the best Farnham hops have been sent into Kent, and if this were really the case, we may be assured it would long before this have produced the same effect there as at Farnham.¹⁵

Farnham Whitebines grown at Canterbury in Kent were called Canterbury Whitebines, and whitebines grown at Mathon, Worcestershire were called Mathon Whitebines or simply Mathons.¹⁶ Though the last whitebines in Farnham were grubbed up in 1929,



*Figure 2. The Mathon Whitebine variety photographed in 2011 at the National Hop Collection.
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Canterbury Whitebines and Mathons are still grown to this day, though they're both sold (to brewers, if not to hop merchants) as Goldings.

Farnham hops were particularly prized for their pale colour and delicate flavour. Stevenson doesn't seem overly impressed by this and says Farnham hops are picked before they're ripe, adding rather sniffily, 'We shall not examine whether such hops ought to be called more delicate, or weaker than those of other districts'.¹⁷ He concludes that the reason Farnham hops get the best price is due to 'the name of Farnham hops' i.e. the brand value.¹⁸

This doesn't really tell us how Farnham hops got to be such a good brand, but a previous researcher looked at this issue in some detail so I shall quote Ashton Booth on this:

In summarising the factors which lead to and maintained their higher price we discover some factors necessary for commercial success in any enterprise.

First, natural advantages, in the case of soil and topography. Secondly, a high quality product, with quality control maintained through all the growing and processing operations. Thirdly, a grading system which ensures evenness of the quality. Fourthly, high quality packaging, prestige wrapping and publicity. Fifthly, a monopoly hold on the best selling site; sixthly, the continued existence of the market demand.¹⁹

The practices of the hops growers in Farnham were quite distinct from those of the growers in Kent and unlike the hop gardens and oast houses of Kent the Farnham growers it seems had *hop grounds* and *hop kilns*.

East Kent and Farnham both have the right soil and climate for growing hops. The Farnham growers however harvested their hops earlier, which helped avoid wind damage, and took more care in their picking and packaging than in other hop growing areas. Hops were mostly picked singly, rather than being stripped off the stalk as in Kent, meaning the hops had fewer leaves and even the few that were accidentally torn off were picked out of the bins.²⁰

Farnham hops were also dried without sulphur as John Towers recounted:

Mr Lance observes, that sulphur is made use of in Kent and Sussex with a view to give a light colour to the hops. The truth is, that this sulphuring is a process of bleaching, an abstraction, and not addition of colour. The slow combustion of sulphur produces sulphurous acid, and that acid (which does not contain a full dose of oxygen), acts upon the hops as it does straw in the manufacture of bonnets. It removes the brown tint, and gives brightness in lieu of it. On this subject Mr Lance says, that at Farnham they avoid sulphur 'and yet obtain a delicate colour, because they sort out the bruised hops, and pick early before they are injured by the wind. These Farnham hops are found to keep their strength longer than the Kent, because they have not any brimstone in them. In Kent, the most delicate coloured hops are likely to be the most inferior in strength. The oil and flavour of the hops are exceedingly volatile; the atmospheric air will take them away in a short time, and more particularly when sulphur is incorporated with them. In drying them with sulphur much of the aromatic bitter passes off with the fumes of the sulphur'.²¹

Farnham practices, and the fact there was a shorter picking season to ensure the hops were still 'fine and delicate', required more labour than was used in Kent and more manure was put on the hop grounds than on hop gardens. This great effort and expense to produce a delicately flavoured hop was considered by William Marshall to be a criminal waste of the country's three greatest assets: Land, Labour and Manure!²²

Farnham hops were packed into pockets and stamped with a particular design, usually including a bell, that changed each year. A hop farmer wrote of this in 1821:

prettily done in red and blue and black, and in a different pattern every year. This year's mark is a bell, (though, that we almost always have, for you know, Farnham hops do really bear the bell,) and a stag in a shield, and a couple of dogs for support.²³

The phrase 'bear the bell' meant to take first place, originating from the lead animal of a flock of sheep having a bell hung round its neck.

Farnham hops were carefully graded and only the best were sent by waggon to the fair at Weyhill near Andover. This was a journey of 30 or 40 miles that took several days to cover. Hop dealers from London faced a trip of 70 miles each way. At Weyhill Fair Farnham



Figure 3. Hop pockets from the 2011 harvest showing the Farnham Bell symbol and marked as the variety Fuggles. Photograph courtesy of Geoff Lunn.

Whitebines held pride of place and were sold from exclusive booths on Blissmore Hall Acre (some of which still stand). Strict quality standards were maintained, and despite being popular with some Farnham farmers a red-bined hop called the ‘never-black’ was banned from the booths for being too coarse.²⁴ Fine and delicate soft ‘silky hops’ were particularly prized by West Country brewers and private gentlemen who would pay a premium price for them.

The area of hops grown in Farnham increased until 1875 when it peaked at 1,592 acres, 41% of the available arable land.²⁵ But this was near the high water mark of English hop growing and Farnham hops could not escape the general decline that soon followed. Demand from brewers reduced and insecticide sprays made

hops a more reliable crop, so less acreage was needed to ensure a good crop.²⁶

Extremely bad summers from 1875 to 1884 caused many Farnham hop growers to give up, and the land was used for other crops, housing or quarrying for gravel. Peckham William’s estate at Badshot Lea where the Farnham Whitebine originated is now mainly given over to housing.

The importance of Weyhill Fair diminished with the coming of railways when London became only a day’s journey away. In the London markets the Farnham hops faced direct competition from Kentish and continental hops. The premium price of Farnham hops became eroded, which made it more difficult for farmers to

recover after bad years as their land rent and other costs were higher.

In 1888 the London hop merchants signed a resolution refusing to go to Weyhill because of the 'tedious way in which business was conducted and the unnecessary waste of time'. The Farnham hop growers agreed to restrict the hop fair at Weyhill to just two days to try and make it more appealing to the London merchants but they failed and it closed in the early 1900s.²⁷

The arrival of downy mildew in England in 1920 spelled the end of the Farnham Whitebines. After a series of bad attacks in the years 1925 to 1929 they were grubbed up and replanted mainly with Fuggles, a popular English variety but not one that will have commanded a premium price.²⁸ The last Farnham hop ground at Holt Pound closed in 1976, the owner blaming E.E.C. regulations for making it uneconomical to continue,²⁹ though pockets of Fuggles stamped with the Farnham bell continue to be produced at Surrey's last hop farm in Puttenham.³⁰

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