

BOOK REVIEWS

The Scratch of the Hop: Hop Picking in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire

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Hereford: Logaston

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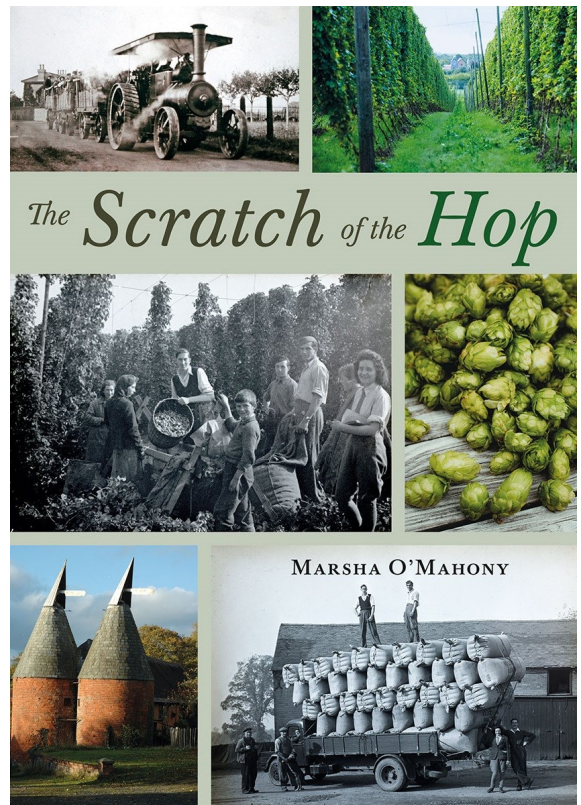
This book is a fine example of the importance of oral history in recording the rural elements of life many years ago before it fades from memory or those that lived back then have passed on. Here, in my part of East Anglia, we had the writing and recordings made by George Ewart Evans in the 1950s (*Ask the Fellows Who Cut the Hay* and *The Pattern Under the Plough*) and more recently Ashley Cooper (*The Long Furrow*) and Spike Mays (*Reuben's Corner* and *The Only Way Was Essex*). Occasionally, in these works, we find references to beer, brewing and pubs as well as a glimpse of past farming techniques and practices. It is in this area that the author, Marsha O'Mahoney, has done well collating many stories and personal accounts backed up with an impressive selection of memorabilia and photographs of hop picking in Herefordshire, Worcestershire and Shropshire. This book is a journey through both time and the life of the hop.

Many of us in the East will be familiar with the tales of Londoners heading down for hop picking 'holidays' in Kent and Sussex. A chance to escape the toil and grime of London life for a few weeks fresh air and countryside life. Those familiar with Margaret Lawrence's book *The Encircling Hop: A History of Hops and Brewing* will know it covers those pickers lives and working on hop farms in Kent and O'Mahoney's book is in a similar vein.

The *Scratch of the Hop* is divided into 10 chapters covering not just the origins, growing, picking and drying but also gives details on competitions, sampling and sales. The final chapter 'Hop Research & Development' will perhaps be of great interest to many. The book is not of a technical nature but is full of information and certainly gives the non-hop growing reader an insight into some of the terms used in the setting up of yards and growing of hops.

The foreword by Simon Parker of Instone Court and current Chairman of the British Hops Association gives a poignant view of the industry today. He is a third-generation hop grower. As he points out 'hops are now a minority but specialist crop'. At its peak the UK was the second largest producer in the world, today we are now seventh and account for just over 1.5% of global production with some 50 growers left out of the 70,000 plus growers across the country in the late 1800s.

The first two chapters give a background of hop growing in England including the oft repeated 'It arrived from Flanders in 1525'. Some may well contend this point. We learn how important a crop it was in the past. This starts the story for the many thousands of pickers who packed up their bags and



travelled from their homes in the Midlands, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol and South Wales to undertake the picking each September. These journeys were often long and arduous, particularly for the smaller children who came along too.

We then gain greater insight about the growing and picking, how the use of hop poles was common up to the end of the nineteenth century prior to the current trellis system being introduced. We hear a more about the poles used from George Hopkins, age 90; 'every farmer who grew hops needed poles ... usually a couple of acres of coppicing, most often ash' These were cut down when about 15 feet high. Fresh poles were needed every year as their working life span was 3-4 years. Some 3,000 poles were used per acre of 1000 plants.

Removing the hop bines from the pole when harvesting was a task in itself as Monica Symonds, age 87, recalls; 'You had to cut them off the pole first ... roll them off ... then unwind them' before picking them off the bine.

When the trellis system was adopted there were the wire-workers, strutting round on wooden stilts. They would spend up to 8 hours at a time 15 feet or so up in the air. The stilts were strapped on round the knees and waste. Many had their lunch in a bag slung over their shoulder so they could stay aloft. Toilet arrangements are not mentioned!

The pickers stories are a mix of delight and a shock at times with regard the living conditions of some. Facilities were rudimentary to say the least and accommodation ranged from the Gypsy Vardoes (horse drawn caravans) to pigsties, cow sheds and tents. All furnishings such as chairs and tables were brought by the pickers themselves. Rudimentary straw bedding was all that was provided by the farms in most cases. Sanitation all but non-existent.

We hear of the Busheller, the booker and the bagger making their rounds during the day recording the quantity of hops picked by each group or family. There was some degree of contention between the busheller and the pickers it seems with some bushellers pressing down on the hops with their elbows to get more into the basket. The pickers were paid according to the weight of hops.

Despite all the hardship there is an overwhelming sense from the notes and photographs that the workers were on the whole cheerful and a happy time was had. They were certainly proud of their work.

We see the arrival of mechanisation; by the late 1950s '70% of hops were machine picked'. The traditional hop picking

holidays and gatherings were soon to become a thing of the past finally disappearing in the late 60s. The development of English hop picking machinery from 1937 and the well-known name of Bruff Engineering makes an appearance with a detailed section on the history of the company and their designs. However, it's the early competitors to Bruff which I found of interest; McConnell Hinds founded by engineers Freddy W. McConnell and George A. Hinds. The company had some limited success but eventually lost out the superior Bruff machinery. There is a contribution by Freddy's daughter, Cherry, now in her late 80s. She was highly skilled model engineer making her way in the male dominated agricultural engineering scene of the 50s, 60s and 70s.

We come to understand the skill and importance of those working in and running the drying kilns. The Head Kiln Dryer being a position of great importance; a bad dryer could spell disaster for the crop. Controlling the time and temperature right were paramount, it took years of learning and experience to attain the Head Dryer position, which was often passed down from father to son. The workers in the kilns clearly faced some of the toughest conditions of all, often working long hours through the night in the hot sticky and humid surroundings. The dried and cooled hops were then bagged up into the traditional 'pocket'. It was only fairly recently that the bale press came into being.

In Chapter 7 there's an insight into the sampling, judging and history of some major hop competitions in the area, the oldest being The Tenbury Agricultural Society (est.1858).

The sales and marketing of the end product were not easy at times. As with all produce supply and demand varied. Getting the hops to market, particularly from Hereford, presented a problem. Eventually the railway network came to the rescue.

The Hop Marketing Board, was formed in 1932 to give a degree of control over pricing and sales to give the already declining industry some stability. It was successful to the extent that large price variations were minimised but its legacy is debated still.

The rise of The Borough area on the South Bank of the Thames in London as the major hop trading centre and the role of the factors and merchants is covered well. An interesting point to note is that direct selling from grower to brewer was deemed unacceptable and 'ungentlemanly'.

We end the book with chapters covering the changes in the brewing industry and a look at the future. The growing number of micro-breweries emphasising the quality and prove-

provenance of their raw materials has been welcomed. They're keen to experiment and always looking for new flavours and this in turn has pushed the breeding of new varieties, long gone are the days of using just Fuggles, Goldings and Challenger. Some 31 varieties are now grown in the UK.

The future may well lie with the machine harvested hedge-row dwarf hops, labour shortages and costs being a significant factor in this move. The dwarf hop was pioneered by Ray Neve and further developed by Peter Darby in the early 80s and now accounts for a just under a quarter of all acreage. Disease resistance, yield and flavour will obviously continue to be of great importance.

Let's hope people continue drinking and enjoying British hopped beer for many years to come!

I am sure this book will be of great interest to beer drinkers, brewers and historians alike. The author has researched the subject well, the end result being a balanced and enjoyable read.

NIGEL SADLER

**Mary Hardy and Her World 1773 – 1809; Volume 2
Barley, Beer and the Working Year**
Bird, M.

**Kingston upon Thames: Burnham Press
2020, Pp874, £40
ISBN: 1 978 1 916206724**

For those of you already familiar with Mary Hardy's world via the previous volumes from author and academic Margaret Bird, this set of four takes the story, using the diaries as a foundation, and expands them to fit into a wider national framework. Mary Hardy's life is again brought to us through her minutely detailed diaries but placed into context by our guide Margaret.

The Author has applied the same intensive, encyclopaedic, approach. Each of the four volumes has a depth of detail that is quite simply breathtaking. Every aspect of the diaries is examined, cross references, footnoted, indexed and then applied to the world in which Mary lived. This was a time when Britain was embarking upon nationwide change; it was the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

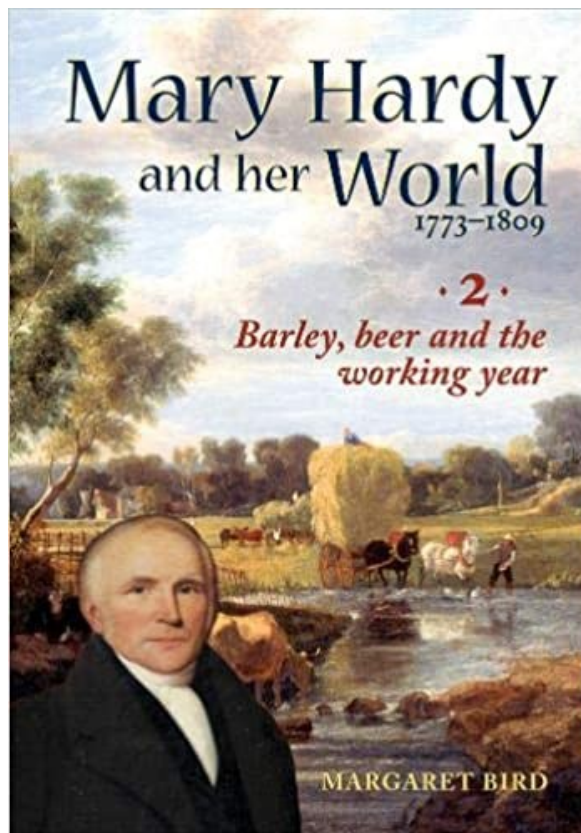
In some cases, as with the previous volumes, the Author translates into modern terms some of the statements Mary makes as well as emphasising and elaborating upon the

shorthanded employed. Invaluably, the Author points us to other sources and further reading.

As the foreword to this volume aptly states: "this volume (of 4) is a magnificent enterprise. Building as it does on the work previously done by the Author that brought Mary Hardy to the world's attention".

Many brewing names appear in this volume, focusing on beer and the problems Mary Hardy and her fellow brewers encounter in producing it and retailing it. Problems not unfamiliar to the brewers of today, large or small, showing that Mary's world is not that dissimilar to commercial life in the 21st Century. Separated by 400 years but linked by common problems; maintaining supplies, managing cash flow, controlling debt and staying the right side of the Excise and the Licensing Authorities. Additionally, it was a surprise to me that Mary's family were already using Vertical Integration and Tied Houses to a great extent, techniques I had assigned to 20th Century businesses. William Hardy had 25 such houses in 1797.

Even though some of Mary Hardy's beer retail problems would be resolved as science, hygiene and transport developments progressed in the coming centuries, fundamentally



her problems are easily recognisable. That span of 400 years since the diaries were written has not changed the problems, it has just changed the solutions.

The volumes, as one would expect of an academic such as Margaret, are exemplar in their use of footnotes, endnotes sidebars, indices and glossaries. An expansive collection of images is used showing both contemporary and historic scenes, both in black and white and colour, and usefully pertinent to the text.

A volume worthy of a place on any degree course in social, economic or industrial history and of great interest to us brewery historians as it sets a scene of pre-industrialisation.

The Author has dedicated a huge portion of her life to Mary Hardy and the resulting publications reflect that. They are encyclopaedic, detailed, accurate and over all very entertaining. You will not just learn about the almost self contained world that Mary Hardy and her family inhabit but about the country in general at a time of wide spread change. The

workers were coming in from the fields and the villages of olde England to the towns and factories of urbanisation and industrialisation. A world long gone but a world whose problems are easily recognisable today - even if our solutions are 400 years ahead of anything Mary Hardy could have dreamt.

Academic as this volume is, there is no doubt, as with previous works on Mary Hardy, that in reading the entries, one is drawn, inexplicable, into that 18th century world which after all is not that distance from our own.

Ultimately, this is the story of nationwide radical change from agrarian economy to an industrial one. Mary could not have foreseen the sweeping change to the country, but she was certainly experiencing these, recording the shoots of industrialisation and recording them for us to enjoy several centuries later.

KEN SMITH