

Country Notes for September 2015

September is the month when we slip from summer into autumn; the month when our thoughts turn to the harvest of berries and crops for the winter ahead. Of course for farmers the harvest began weeks ago and many crops are already accounted for and stored away safely. However for one crop, which is associated particularly with Kent, September is the month when the harvest begins. This of course is the hop harvest. At one time Kent was the biggest producer of hops, although I gather that particular honour now falls to Herefordshire.

In the nineteenth century there were 77,000 acres of hop gardens in this country - now apparently there are about 3,000 acres countrywide.

The hop plant, *Humulus lupulus*, grows high - and the sight of hop gardens with their framework of wooden poles to support them was once familiar to everyone. Kent had the wood to supply both the poles and the charcoal with which to dry the hops in its distinctive oast houses.

There is little evidence these days of hop growing in Hollingbourne, although I am told that at one time hop pickers from London descended on the village each September to help with the harvest and have a break in the countryside at the same time. It would be interesting to know more about hop growing in the village as it clearly was important in years gone by.

Equally interesting would be to know the varieties that were grown. The two most likely would have been Goldings and Fuggles - but there are many more varieties, all with interesting and enticing names. The purpose of the hops was to add to the flavour of the beer and improve its ability to keep. Before the sixteenth century beer was brewed using only malt and was known as ale rather than beer.

In the twentieth century people turned to lager rather than beer and this helped the demise of hops gardens, as lager requires less hops. Let's hope that the increased interest in real ale might bring hop growing back to our area so that we may once again enjoy one of the glories of the September hop harvest.

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