



Right: the hop in flower. Top: the coir twine that's used for training the plants. Bottom: Caroline cuts a bine at its base, in preparation for harvest



# Hop-picking

On their family farm in Kent, Caroline and William Alexander grow hops for all manner of uses

**H**OPS HAVE BEEN grown at Castle Farm in Sevenoaks, Kent, since at least 1720. A map from that year in the farmhouse sitting room shows that William and Caroline Alexander, the farm's owners, are continuing the long tradition on site, as well as tending to 100 miles of Kentish lavender hedges, herds of beef cattle and orchards of apples.

## The hop garden

The hop vine, *Humulus lupulus*, is perennial. It is dioecious, meaning that the male and female reproductive parts are borne on separate plants. It is only the female flower, in the shape of a cone, that is of commercial interest. These cones contain the complex resins and essential oils that impart both bitterness and aromatic flavour to beer during the brewing process. They also have natural antibacterial qualities.

Historically, hops were grown up tall, thin wooden poles. The entire pole was then lifted and lowered for harvesting. From the mid-1800s, poles were replaced by wire grid structures. These were supported by chestnut stakes, with vertical strings attached, up which the hops could climb. The strings could then be released for harvesting.

Castle Farm's hop garden, as a hop field is known, is farmed in this way. There are rows of 6m tall chestnut poles set 5m apart. This distance was originally set as it was wide enough for a horse and cart to pass through. Today, narrow vineyard tractors are used.

The intricate art of attaching the strings was traditionally carried out by workers on long wooden stilts. Today, stringers stay on the ground and use long bamboo poles and a continuous length of coconut coir twine. Although William owns a pair of vintage stilts, they are rarely used. Instead, >



Traditional Kentish oast houses. The wind-rotated cowls helped to dry the hops by drawing the wood fires inside and expelling any moisture



The growing system, constructed from 6m chestnut poles, horizontal aerial wires and vertical strings up which the hops climb

Below: the Alexanders' son Thomas cuts the bines free at the top. In the past, this job would have been done from the ground, the knife being fixed to a long pole



Thomas works his way along the rows with his curved knife, while his helpers collect the bines as they fall



Inside the Alexanders' purpose-built drying sheds, where the bines can be hung up and kept intact

*“On the last morning, when we had picked the last field, there was a queer game of catching the women and putting them in the bins. It is evidently an old custom.”*

**From George Orwell's hop-picking diary, 1931**



A convoy of tractors carries the harvested hops from the farm's hop garden to its drying sheds, where they will stay for about two weeks

a platform on a telescopic boom allows him access to the high wires for maintenance.

#### Tending the crop

Individual hop plants are planted in small mounds of earth, which facilitate drainage. This has always been the traditional way. These mounds are known as hop hills. Before the stringing method was introduced, the mound used to help hold the growing pole in place, too.

In April, the plants throw up a mass of shoots, from which three or four vigorous ones are selected. These are trained onto a string by hand. They then climb clockwise up the string to create what is known as a hop bine.

“We manually pull off all additional shoots, as they are not needed,” explains Caroline, adding that they are tender to eat. Known as Poor Man's Asparagus, “they can be fried in garlic butter, slipped into salads or used to garnish fish”.

Hop bines grow to a height of around 6m. “In June and July, with warm temperatures, they can grow 15cm in 24 hours,” says William. In July, side shoots, or laterals, appear, on which the lime-green flowers develop in August. In September, the hops are ready for harvesting.

#### Harvesting

In the 18th and 19th centuries, hop-picking gangs came down from London to Kent in droves, camping out in makeshift hopper hut encampments. The huts were long, low sheds divided into tiny rooms and were shared among families. The beds were often simply just a stack of hop bine and straw, with a blanket on top.

Early each morning, at around 5am, a long line of pickers would stand across the hop garden, ready for a binman to pull down a bine. This he did with a curved hook, or hop dog, fixed to a long pole.

When the bines were down, the pickers (mostly women) would gather round and pluck off the flowers. They put them into large bins (sacks on wooden frames) or wicker baskets.

A talisman then measured and recorded the volume of hops picked. Frequently, pickers were paid in hop tokens, which they could spend locally on beer and groceries. The tokens were converted into cash when all the harvest was in.

#### Diversification

With demand for hops from the brewing industry on the wane, the Alexanders stopped growing their crop for >



Caroline with one of the narrow vineyard tractors used for harvesting the hops and maintaining the hop garden



The female hop's cone-like, pale-green flowers, which appear in August



Inside the female flower are the sought-after resins and essential oils used in beer-making



Used decoratively, dried hop bines are thought to bring good luck



Caroline uses her crop to make a hop- and lavender-infused therapeutic tea

commercial beer-making in 1999. They then chose to diversify and now produce hops for interior decorations and their own range of wellbeing products.

Hop bines have long been used for decoration in hop-growing areas of Britain. They were traditionally hung up in pubs and farmhouses for luck. "We sell fresh and dried bines to the decorative, floristry and film industries, where they have once again found favour," explains Caroline.

For the couple's health products, the hops are combined with the lavender they grow to make balms, tonics, teas and scented pillows. "The herbal properties complement each other," says Caroline.

Brewing is not totally out of the picture, however – the Alexanders still sell hop flowers to home-brewers, favouring 'Fuggles', an aromatic old Kentish variety.

#### The new way

With the decorative use of the hops in mind, the bines at Castle Farm today are cut carefully, and only in dry weather. Thomas, the Alexanders' eldest son, cuts the bines from a tractor ladder using an original curved knife. Below him, Caroline and her team of seasonal assistants catch and gather

the bines, gently piling them onto the tractor's cart, which transports them to the farm's drying sheds.

"When we were growing hops for the brewing market, the bines were taken straight to the hop-picking shed, where the flowers were mechanically picked, before being dried in our oast house," says William. "Now that the bines are required intact, they are hung up in our special drying sheds instead, on another aerial wire system. Warm air circulates and dries them, so they are preserved in prime condition."

Caroline adds: "Once dried to an ideal state, the bines are cut free once again and 'snaked' carefully in cardboard packing boxes, ready for sale and despatch."

Some of the flowers are also put aside for use in the Alexanders' sleep and relaxation products. This combination of uses helps the family to preserve a part of Kent's hop-growing history for future generations. ■

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A group of migrant hop-pickers in Kent, in 1904

## Beer-making

Dried hops are used in brewing to add bitterness and distinct flavours and aromas to the beer.

The first hops to be grown for beer in England were cultivated near Canterbury in Kent in 1520. The practice was already widespread in Holland and Germany. It soon took off and by 1655, Kent was producing a third of the UK's hops.

As the brewing business burgeoned, farmers became eager to grow the profitable crop. The distinctive oast houses designed to dry the freshly picked hops sprang up throughout Kent. In the late 1800s, hop-growing was at its peak and established on more than 80,000 Kentish acres.

The brewers use only the female hop flowers. How bitter the beer is depends on the "alpha acid level" of the hop variety. Varietal blending enables breweries to develop their own, signature recipes.

With an increase in imported beer and the rise in the popularity of lager, beer production in the UK steadily declined in the early part of this century. By 1932, only 11,000 acres of Kent remained in production. The use of hop-picking machines from the Sixties onwards also eliminated the need for a seasonal migrant workforce.

There are some hop farmers who continue to supply the brewing industry today, while others, like the Alexanders, now grow hops for other uses.



Photographs: Francis Frith

Women had the job of picking the flowers into bins