

Hops, Harvest and Song.

Hops have enjoyed the Sussex climate, especially the Eastern part of the county, since the 16th century. There is a long history of hop picking families arriving on farms for seasonal work, which sometimes doubled up as the nearest thing to a summer holiday. Folk have enjoyed singing about ale for as long as they have been drinking it, and harvest work being laborious would often be helped along with a song.

Jeanette Eason (Hop picker as a child in Brede, Rother Valley, 1960s)

My family on my dad's side, they all went hop picking and I can remember getting down there. We didn't have a car so we went all in the back of an army lorry. Everything went in the lorry whether it was mattresses, pillows, blankets, cooking pots, you name it. As a child it was idyllic, our fun was to be dragged up on top of the tractor and the trailer, on all of these sort of stacks and hop bales and bounce around like nobody's business hanging on for grim death, no health and safety in those days, and trundle off up to where they stored them. I am a Sussex girl and I'm very proud of Sussex. So it was quite nice to actually know that I was part of the families that were picking hops in Sussex and not in Kent, a little bit of one-upmanship.

Chris Hare (South Downs Folk Singers)

Songs of drinking are huge cannon and they could be songs just about the pleasure of drinking, the songs of good company and drinking, or songs which celebrate the barley or the hops. You can't study English folk song without realising that a very large proportion of them relate in some way to drinking and brewing or the ingredients therein. I think it's pretty safe to say that when most people lived on the land, and when people's livelihood, prosperity and happiness was dependent on a successful harvest. It's going to be, not just a passing interest, but a vital interest that that is achieved, so all the harvesting, the ploughing, the sowing is absolutely central to your life, so when you sing about it you're going to do it in quite a profound way.