

# the guardian

## Hopsters meet hipsters as East End families relive the exodus to Kent

Each September, tens of thousands of grafting Londoners used to decamp to the hop fields.  
Today a different type of Londoner has a taste for craft beers. A pioneering art/social  
project united the two tribes

by Tim Adams



Artist Kathrin Böhm revives the old ways in Kent last week. Photograph: Andy Hall for the Observer

For more than a century, the first two weeks in September in the East End of London meant one thing: hop picking. At its peak, in about 1880, 200,000 people – overwhelmingly women and children – made the journey down to Kent for the hop harvest. Many returned to the same farms, generation after generation, until the 1960s when the combination of mechanisation and the beginning of a collapse in domestic hop farming, as well as greater opportunities for women in London, brought the annual working holiday to an abrupt halt.

On Friday morning some of those who had made that hopping pilgrimage as children returned to the hop gardens to relive some of their most vivid days – and pick some hops. The pickers mustered in the sun outside Dagenham Library at 9am, with the same kind of excitement as when they set off for the countryside as kids. Vi Charlton, sparkle-eyed at 84, recalled how she, her mother, aunts, grandmother and many of her 43 cousins would head for Kent every summer in the 1930s, with "furniture and all sorts" in the back of a truck. "My nan would take lace curtains for the windows of the tin shack," she said. "It was hard work for our mums but paradise for us kids."

This time, in making their return to that paradise, Vi and the rest of two coaches full of expectant hop-pickers were, whether they knew it or not, also a living part of an award-winning art project. It's the idea of a German-born artist Kathrin Böhm who has lived and worked in Hackney for 17 years. Curated by the urban arts foundation Create, Böhm's project is called "Company: Movement, Deals and Drinks" and is part of a trend that seeks to build social capital directly through art. With funding from Create's annual £50,000 Bank of America-sponsored art award, and working with the co-operation of Barking and Dagenham council, the idea is to establish a drinks-making company that is both a generator of creative connections and a commercial enterprise. When asked what kind of art she makes, Böhm, who leads the hopping coach trip with a cheerful evangelist's spirit, says she is concerned with "making the public realm".

The public realm in question is an effort to forge links between several very distinct groups of people, in east London in this case: links between Shoreditch hipsters and what you might call Dagenham "hopsters". The fast-growing craft beer industry in Britain is at its most eclectic in and around the artistic hub of Shoreditch and Hoxton; the cultural memory of some of the poorest neighbouring boroughs, meanwhile, is still rooted in hopping – but the two tribes don't mix at all.

The mission of Create's director Hadrian Garrard is to bring the energies of art to unexpected places. He points out: "There are 13,000 artists living and working in east London, Europe's largest cultural quarter. But if you live in Barking and Dagenham you are less likely to walk into an art gallery than anywhere else in the UK. This area has the lowest level of cultural participation. Our work is about finding out whether artists can develop relationships with communities in different ways."

Also on the trip to Kent are Jen Löwius and Stephanie Poltinger, two representatives of the hip Bermondsey-based brewer Kernel, who will drive the fresh hops back that evening to flavour 3,000 litres of a new green hop ale. To complete the circle, the beer will be sold next month at that hipster pilgrimage site, the Frieze art fair, as part of a range of "Company" drinks that will include elderflower cordials and rosehip syrups made from flowers and fruit foraged and grown in city farm projects in and around Dagenham – each rich with other shared stories and "psycho-geographic" connections.

**Once they get off** the coaches at the Little Scotney Farm in Lamberhurst, the white-haired hopsters don't care about what the curators call "relational aesthetics". They just want to get hopping. They file down to the hop gardens where the late summer sun is filtered through the rows of hop vines trained on their coconut-string frames 20-feet high, and some of the old childhood magic returns. Working at times alongside the craft brewers, the

hopsters' fingers remember the speed at which they used to tackle the long stems in their teens. A hessian sack quickly starts to fill with soft green kernels. And while they strip the plants, of course, they talk.

George Orwell, who came hopping in 1931 on one of his living-as-a-tramp investigations, said that "hop-picking is far from being a holiday, and, as far as wages go, no worse employment exists". He spent a lot of time complaining about cracked skin on his fingers. The returning hop-pickers don't see it that way at all. Hopping was opportunity for sunlit freedom away from the harsher confines of the city. John Campbell and Terry Bird, East End boys now in their 70s, recall the excitement of running into school each year with news that the letter from the hop farmer had come, inviting them back.

Georgina Coleira who came for a dozen or more summers ending in 1960, when she had a child of her own, recalls the teenage rush of freedom away from her strict father. Was there holiday romance? "Not half," she says. "That's why most of us came. You'd get down here and your mum would make you sort out your straw bedding then you would go straight round to see last year's friend or last year's boyfriend or whatever." She still likes to use candle-lamps at home in London because they remind her of heady hopping evenings.

Little Scotney, which is on National Trust land, is one of only 50 hop farms left in Britain; Ian Strang, the farmer, suggests there were probably 50 in this parish alone before the war. He grew up on his father's farm over the hill, and took the tenancy here in 1990. His oasthouses, in which the hops are dried, are still working as they have always done, though they are heated these days by "extortionate" diesel burners rather than coal; most others have been converted into grand design residences for London commuters.

Strang remembers as a "naive redneck boy" the East End families decamping for the harvest. It was, he says with a grin, "one's first initiation into three things: swearing, sweets and what I will call human excrement – they tended to go in the hop garden..."

Now most of the hop-pickers' work in the gardens is done by tractor and machine. Strang employs about 20 seasonal workers for the harvest, generally locals. One family, mother and two sons, still comes down from London, as they have for 30 years. Tom Barton, the younger son at 28, lives in Abbey Wood in southeast London and works as a tree surgeon. At Scotney he labours in a hangar-like building feeding hop vines on to a conveyer system from 7am until 5pm; he still describes this as the "best few weeks of the year".

Most hop farmers use eastern European labour, but Strang believes a nod toward the old tradition is important: "The links between Londoners and farming disappeared with hop-picking. There is hardly any connection now between consumer and producer."

Most of Strang's crop goes to the London brewer Fuller's. He places most of his hope, though, in the craft beer revolution of microbreweries such as Kernel (hundreds of smaller enterprises have opened in Britain in the last year alone). His hops produce a wonderful ale with the Westerham Brewery called Scotney, and before we head back to the coaches he opens a crate for the hopsters. Their day's work done, and the hops dispatched to the brewery in Bermondsey, many of the pickers have now fashioned Pan-like garlands of hops for themselves, as was the habit of their childhood, to take back to Dagenham. Orwell, never a man wholly in touch with his inner pagan, couldn't understand the custom. Vi Charlton had never tasted a drop of beer in her 84 years before the Scotney Ale on Friday afternoon, but

believed she might get a taste for it. Her husband, she said, is in hospital in London. She planned to visit him that evening to show him the dark stains of hop juice on her hands.

*For further information on the art project go to [createlondon.org](http://createlondon.org)*

### **Taste it yourself**

The best places in Britain to taste craft beers, as recommended by Observer Food Monthly

**The Hanging Bat** A craft beer nirvana offering over 20 keg and cask taps and more than 100 bottled beers. Lothian Road, Edinburgh. [thehangingbat.com](http://thehangingbat.com)

**The Parlour** This old-school pub has local beers from Beartown to Boggart.

Chorlton, Manchester. [theparlour.info](http://theparlour.info)

### **The Beerhouse**

Local cask ales and beer festivals, plus a sister microbrewery producing excellent pale ale and bitter. Bury St Edmunds. [burybeerhouse.co.uk](http://burybeerhouse.co.uk)