Company Drinks

Hopping stories and images from families in east London who went hop picking in the past.

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Hopping Heritage Season
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Introduction

In 2014 Company Drinks started with the simple suggestion to go picking again.

“Going picking” is a well known term to everyon who grew up in east London mid last century and it stands for the annual mass exodus of working class families – mainly women and children – to Kent to make some extra money from fruit and hop-picking.

A lot has changed since these hopping days. The geographies and demographics of east London have shifted dramatically, resulting in a less clear division between city and countryside and a much more diverse population.

The invitation by Company Drinks to go picking again is as much a reflection of the past and the immense popularity of hop-picking, as it is a reflection on local resources and identities, cultural traditions, the value of labour and new collective possibilities. Going picking is also a practical task to understand and make use of what grows in the places we live in.

Family photo courtesy of Evelyn Hazard

Image courtesy of George Lagden and Shirley Smith: family at Tipples Farm

Image courtesy of Maureen Hostler: Brother Terry and mother Ellen at hopbin, 1949

Image courtesy of Maureen Hostler

Image courtesy of Maureen Hostler

Image courtesy of Violet Charlton

The Women and Why They Picked

'You didn't see a lot of wildlife in Canning Town.'

> The things that stand out were the company and the enjoyment on the field. The atmosphere on the field was always happy. There never seemed to be misery. There was always a happy atmosphere there. I thought it was good. You got away from London, had a breath of fresh air for the children, built them up. You got a bit of money at the end. We sort of saved up before we went. We got our food ready, our tins of food. And it didn't really cost us a lot. But what money we earned hop picking, we might come home with a bit! Mrs M

There is no single reason why so many London women went to Kent as casual agricultural labourers during the hop harvest. There is no single answer to why they were prepared to suffer the hardships and deprivations of living in hoppers' huts. As Mrs M begins to explain above, the reasons were varied, overlapping and often contradictory. Chapter 1 looks at some of the reasons the women themselves give for why they went hopping. But as will be seen later, the reasons for the yearly migration to Kent changed, as did the hop harvest, the women and their lives.

Whether the women saw picking as a holiday or as paid work depended partly on their financial circumstances, but also on their skill and speed as pickers. The following comment was made by Mrs D, a woman who saw hopping as part of the yearly cycle of agricultural work to which she and her family were tied:

> You see now, I'd go hopping, do a bit of fruiting. Time I'd done hopping and one thing and another – I could pick hops – so that I'd come home with a nice few bob saved up for Christmas. That's how I used to do it ... I used to pick 60 bushels of hops a day, on my own, see? ... I always had a bin on my own. There you are, that's my old hopping book there. That's how many hops I used to pick! Sixty, sixty-four a day. I was good at it ... I was very quick. Good with my hands. Mrs D

Mrs D was a fast picker, exceptional in fact, and as a representative of English Hops Ltd agreed, it was not sensible to go hopping for 'big money' unless you had such skill.

The need for money to buy special things for Christmas, finding extra shillings for specific items like winter coats, or simply to meet a surprisingly big bill, were all mentioned by women as being important reasons for going hopping. What might be considered luxuries at other times of the year could effectively become necessities at Christmas time.

Mrs S I used to put the hopping money away for Christmas for the kids' toys and new clothes and that.

Mrs C When we were kids that's what my mum used to do. It would clear her debts and loans...

Mrs S Money for the tallyman! Like old whatshisname down Burdett Road.

Mrs ML That was the only way I got my school uniform, mum picking hops.

Mrs C And we'd all have a new velvet dress, Christmas – out of the hopping money. 'You don't pick', she'd say, 'and you don't get no new dress.' You had to work like bloody hell to get that velvet dress.

Not all the women who went hopping specifically to earn money did so to pay for extras, or because their skill made it worthwhile. Some women went because they had little choice or opportunity of finding alternative waged work.

Mrs AA used to go to Kent with her grandmother, aunts and cousins:

My family had to pick for the money. They were poor. They'd have to make the kids pick. My nan needed the money. There was 13 kids in the family ... She obviously went for the money, but it was a break as well from life in London. But the money came first. It was a way of earning a wage with all the kids. I don't think she could have done that in London. See there was so many kids. What work could you do with all them around you? You could work, see, and keep an eye on us. And everybody, all of us, earned our own little bits ... see, me nan went primarily for the money. She had to. Me grandad drank most of his money away. It was hard work for me nan. She'd have a laugh but it was hard work. She used to have to earn her money. It was different for other women and kids. But see even though it was hard graft and she needed the money, it was her break. It meant a real lot to her. She got knocked around by me grandad – drink again, it's always drinking. We used to see a lot of it. So getting away down hopping was something to look forward to. It was a break away from him. It was a different way of life.

The significance of hopping being a job where the women could take their children is looked at in more detail later in the book. But it wasn't just 'childcare provision' that mattered to the women, they also acknowledged how important

it was that the elderly, the less able, very young babies and even household pets, could all be taken hopping. Most of the women remembered this as a particular perk, which helped to make their lives easier. Mrs C (who cleaned the Mansion House steps on her knees every weekday morning and two evenings, using just soapy water and a scrubbing brush), pointed out that in London many of the women found it necessary but hard to leave their children at home, often still asleep, while they went out to work.

> You could have your children with you down hopping. Not like the cleaning work I had in London ... That was hard. Mrs C

> All of us went. Nan, kids, aunts, cousins. We used to take the horse. We even took the goldfinches in their cage! Mrs D

It was not only the relief, and convenience, of being able to keep her child with her that Mrs M remembered. Hopping was also a 'treat'. She and her in-laws went because:

> That was their summer holiday ... I used to go when Aunt F was down there ... I used to look forward to the holiday.

Mrs S, on the other hand, thought that her in-laws emphasized the holiday aspect of hopping to show that they did not have to go for the money.

> They thought they were a bit posh. They used to make a fuss about it being a holiday – to prove they were comfortable! It was no good us pretending. Our mum had to do it for the money. Mrs S

Earning some money to take home at the end of the season did not seem to be an issue for some of the pickers. For instance, Mrs J, who used to go hopping as a girl, and now has the tenancy of a pub next to a hop farm, made the following observation about some of her hopping customers:

> I don't know how they earned any money out of it, all the money they earned was all spent on beer anyway!

Mrs RR's aunt was a businesswoman who 'had money', but still went hopping for her holidays even though she could have afforded something different.

> My old Aunt H had money. She owned a florist in the old market and still always used to go hopping. Still went. She had a few bob. My mum used to work for her. That good business and she still went hopping ... definitely didn't go hopping for the money. I mean, even the jewellery she left. You know it was only in the latter years that she bothered to go

THE WOMEN AND WHY THEY PICKED

GILDA O'NEILL

Mother Ellen and brother Terry, 1949.
Photo courtesy of Maureen Hostler.

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abroad ... it was always hopping ... go down there for a month or more and come home every Wednesday to have a sauna down the East Ham Baths!

Mrs RR's aunt had another reason for going hopping, one that she shared with other women I spoke to. For Aunt H, hopping wasn't just a holiday, it was also a legitimate reason to be away from her husband.

See for years my Aunt H and Uncle C, well, they never got on. And, er, I think, er, he had another woman. You know ... It wasn't very good, all that. Mrs RR

Mrs AA's grandmother had similar problems.

I love my nan. I can sit and listen to her stories forever. I get choked ... See even though it was hard graft and she needed the money, it was her break. It meant a real lot to her. She got knocked round a bit by my grandad. Drink again. It's always drinking. We used to see a lot of it. [Pause] So, getting away down hopping was something to look forward to. It was a break away from him to a different way of life. The mud puddles with your wellies. Mostly nice weather! Few wet days when all the water'd run up your arms from the bines. But you imagine, in the pissing down – oops! – the pouring down of rain [laughter] and someone starts a conversation, or a song. Imagine it! Kids all in the mud with their wellies.

Wouldn't have to worry. [Pause] 'Roll Out the Barrel.' And all that!

Even the women who had no money to spare, and who might have to find some extra cash to go hopping, would still be glad to get to Kent for the harvest.

G Was it the holiday or the money that was important?

Mrs C Holiday. Because you couldn't afford a holiday otherwise. Don't know about you.

Mrs S We never had no holiday, never. Apart from hopping.

Mrs C That was ours. That was ours.

Mrs ML We used to ask, 'What's for dinner?', and mum'd [Mrs C] say, 'I'll see what I can afford.' And we had something, but holiday ... Only holiday we ever had.

G So, could you earn?

Mrs C No, not there. Not there. [The particular farm that they went to.] Well, I never did, and my mother never did, because it was a working farm where you had to pick so many hops. You know, to earn sort of, well, you couldn't even earn a pound a day. And, er, well I think to myself: it was a hard way of living, for what you earned for what you done. And the hours you put at it. Yes!

G Could you earn more at home, in London?

Mrs C Yes, but here you'd have your holiday, and your children with you. Actually you was taking a cut in your money. It cost you more to live down there – you know it do ... But, of course, you've still got to remember the rate of money then. See? I had to save up to come down hopping.

G You had to save up to go hopping?

Mrs C Yes. But in London, I'll tell you the truth. I did cleaning in the Mansion House. Twenty-five bob a week and go back twice a week on an evening. Know what I used to do in the Mansion House? Clean them bloody steps outside. That was my job. Yes.

G You didn't? With little ones? What hard work. What times did you have to do?

Mrs C Six. Our time was six in the morning till nine. Then twice a week we used to go back. Twenty-five shillings for that.

G Hopping must've seemed a doddle!

If women like Mrs A's grandmother were getting away from drunken men – for the hop harvest at least – others, like Mrs C, were getting away from the hardships of city life. With the development of modem transport systems and the increase in private car ownership, the hop gardens now seem much nearer to east London, but during the war years they could have been in another world. This was particularly true in those years when the East End was being bombarded during the blitz. By going to Kent the women and their children could escape the horrors of the air raids, which affected so many London families, killing loved ones and destroying their homes. Later, when the war was over, they could temporarily escape the housing shortage, which, for many of them, meant living in cramped, sub-standard conditions, billeted on neighbours or family. Mrs M talked about many benefits of living the country life.

It was different hours, different environment. You got away from it – London. You got away from that being 'cramped in' in London. Once you got out in the fields it was so different. When you was in London, you was squashed in. That's how it seems to me. People. You was all free down hopping. Relaxed. If you went to Southend you was lucky. Even when we went to Loughton for the day, from the mission, that was wonderful. This was further away, and we stayed there! It was beautiful ... During the war, especially, we decided to go down to get away from London, if you know what I mean ... that's when we took R [her daughter]. It was Mr M's family what actually did it [the picking]. I went for the break. To get away from the raids.

The Kent countryside did not escape the bombs entirely. Mr D, a hop farmer, provided a rural version of the air raid shelter for the pickers.

Mr D We had a plane come down here! We had one crash in the hop garden when we was picking! That caused a scene. The bloke who crashed in the hop garden, by the time we got him out, was dead. That was a Messerschmitt 109. We had a big dyke dug up there – soon as the warnings went they used to stand down in it. Below ground. And when the all clear went they'd go back out on the bins.

G Did you have much trouble round here?

Mr D See, we had the worst day. About eight raids that day.

G Not so bad as London with the blitz then?

Mr D Oh yeh! I mean the only time they dropped their bombs here was when they got shot or tried to get back. Otherwise they'd carry on to London, obviously. See?

It was not just violent men – whether husbands or bombers – that the women were glad to leave behind. Many of the women's recollections were from the days before smokeless zones were introduced, making the contrast between the Kent countryside and inner London even more vivid. Going hopping was as much about the desire to leave the choking atmosphere of the polluted city (if only for a while) as it was about the draw of working in the greenery of the hop fields, even if the source of the greenery was sometimes a little surprising for town dwellers.

Mrs T You know how you used to walk through the fields after you'd finished picking one? You'd have to move through that field to the next one. I'll never forget one morning when I got up. I'd never experienced

Mother at Spring Farm, Kent.
Photo Courtesy of Teresa Dimech and Raymond Brown.

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anything like it. There was all these people walking across to the next field and I like saw these, a big line of green things. All hopping! And I said, 'Whatever's that?' And they said they was grasshoppers. Well. Like, as the people were walking through the fields, they was moving. I'll never forget that. Like a long line moving. You didn't see a lot of wildlife in Canning Town!

Mrs R No, the birds never sang there – they coughed!

It wasn't just the birds in Canning Town, the children coughed too. Their mothers looked on the fresh air of the Kent countryside as an important boost to the children's health. Their offspring could be 'built up' and have their lungs 'unclogged' to make them strong enough to withstand the coming winter that brought seasonal ill health and increased child mortality. Kent County Council (KCC), however, were more concerned with the children's possible ill health in the summer. Medical care and other support services for the yearly influx of Londoners meant bigger bills. Instead of seeing the hoppers as the vital source of casual labour which the farmers knew them to be, the local authority viewed the hoppers as potential sources of epidemics and users of costly-services – a threatening 'other' to upset the tranquillity and order of the rural idyll.

Arguments between the Kent and London county councils began and continued. Finally, Kent demanded that the LCC contribute to any additional costs incurred as a result of the Londoners' presence. The debate was particularly bitter about provision for the hoppers' children. The KCC claimed that the children were of no economic value and did not contribute to the harvest, but were in Kent's beautiful countryside for the sake of their health. (This was not that far from the truth in many cases.) London made the counter argument that the women and children would not be there at all had their labour not been needed so badly by the Kent hop growers.

Whether it was the hoppers or the farmers who were the real 'winners' was an official argument, conducted at the level of conferences and public reports, between the county councils. Superficially, at least, the women's experiences and memories seem to support Kent's belief that it was the Londoners who came out best. Mrs AB told the following story:

Pound and half born! I must've been like a bleeding rabbit, mustn't I? And my mum said hopping was the making of me. I was born in the April, see, and I wasn't getting on very well. I was born indoors. And one of the neighbours – Aunt Ginny as we used to call her, another adopted aunt! – said to my mum, 'Bring her down hopping.' She'd been down hopping for years, you see. And my mum said, 'No, it'll kill her.' My mum hadn't been before. She said, 'Course it won't. You bring her

down.' So mum took me and the three youngest boys. Aunt Ginny wrote to the farmer and said she wanted another bin, was it all right? And they wrote back and said yes it was, so we had a hut for ourselves and a bin. And as I say when we went back I was twice the size I'd been before I went. Four and half pounds when I went back from hopping. Born a pound and half. And I went every year after that. And whatever job I had, my mum used to make me pack it up. Yeh, to come hopping, 'cos she said it was the making of me. Well a lot of them used to come just to earn money, but a lot of them didn't. My mum used to come 'cos she said it built you up for the winter. All the bad fogs you got in London, the kids'd get chesty and that.

Yet KCC appear to have deliberately understated the importance of the vast numbers of pickers required each year for the harvest. As the LCC pointed out, without the Londoners, there would have been no harvest. They also reinforced the point made by Mrs AB above, that many gave up their regular jobs to do casual work in the hop fields. Farmer D's memories could be used to support either side of the argument.

I mean, they used to come away and they'd have to give their jobs up. Otherwise the children never got out of London at all, did they? They used to come down here and it'd be three or four days before they finished choking, time they'd got all the soot off their lungs. And them days, course, when they used to get the smogs and fogs. I been up there and when you blow your nose, it's black ... people'd be walking around with scarves round their faces ... you don't hear of fogs in London now ... But those days they used to be. Well a lot of the pickers used to come down Easter and wouldn't go back till after hop picking. Stay right through the season. Strawberry picking, currant picking, whatever there was going.

The local authorities had concerns other than the health – or lack of it – of the pickers' children. They were also concerned with their school attendance – or lack of it. How the pickers viewed the annual break in their, or their children's education depended on their view of the schools and the relative importance to them of going hopping. Mrs A, one of the younger informants, had strong views on missing school.

I think in the London schools they used to take it for granted. I think so, you know. It was the done thing for so many kids anyway. Mind you I was never really at school anyway. Always used to have the truant officer round! I was always on the hop! Wonder if that's where it comes from? 'On the hop' 'cos of going down hopping? As a kid then I'd really look forward to getting away down to hopping.

Left: In front of the hoppers' huts.
Photo courtesy of Violet Charlton.

Rose Wright (mother), picking.
Photo courtesy of Rose Wright.

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THE WOMEN AND WHY THEY PICKED

GILDA O'NEILL

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The idea that missing school did not matter too much if you were a Londoner was also held by Mrs D, who missed school every year. When she became a mother her own children did the same, and it was her turn to take them, as their grandmother had taken her.

> Mrs D They never used to take no notice then. Everybody did it then, didn't they? I should think schools could have shut up when it was hopping time. Round our way.
>
> G How about the local school board man? Did he used to go to the fields looking for the local Kent kids?
>
> Mrs D That's right, yeh. He was always looking for them. But no one used to take no notice of us, did they, coming from London. Our mum and dad had us all ready on the Monday we went home. We was all washed and polished. Take a note to tell 'em you'd been hopping. And er, just go back in school. And we used to stop there all winter, you know. Yeh, we used to go to school regular, every winter. Never in the summer.

Sending in a 'note' was quite usual but not all the notes explained where the children had actually been.

> Mrs C I'd send a letter in. That was it. They'd gone on their annual holiday. I never said 'hop picking'. Annual holiday.
>
> Mrs M Lot of them said, 'We're going down the chalet!' Not hopping.
>
> Mrs C Yeh. Not the hop hut. [Mock posh voice] 'The chalet.'

Mrs T's mother didn't have the opportunity to send her note. The 'school board man' came to the house while her daughter was away hopping with a friend's family.

> My mother said to the school board man when he came, 'Oh! she's gone away with her auntie to Ilfracombe in Devon.' And he said, 'What a lucky little girl!' [Laughing] I never even seen Devon! I'd never even been down Southend, let alone Devon.

Other women didn't see any point in making excuses; their families had little choice about going hopping. As Mrs AB explained:

> We used tell 'em they'd be away. Wasn't much they could do. There were so many kids would be away. Most of the really poor kids had to

go. For the money, for their health and that. No, the schools couldn't do nothing, could they?

Farmer D, as an employer of hop pickers, was affected only marginally by the children missing their education.

Well, in them days, it was no problem. But after the war, like now, if they want to come down here they just report. And you know I have no bother. We used to have forms at one time. The farmers would have to sign it and they was all right – to say the family was working hop picking. Oh special forms we used to sign.

Whether the children would have missed even more school due to ill health is something, which can only be guessed at. What is certain is that going hopping was too important in their lives for a little thing like the school board to stop them. Their feelings about the work and what the experience meant to the hoppers were puzzled over by Mrs R and Mrs T.

Mrs R It was just a thing you did. It was more a holiday than anything else for us. Never had a holiday, did we? Well we never did ...

Mrs T We was exploited really. All for a pittance we earned, didn't we?

Mrs R And when you think about our conditions! We was exploited ... and it rained solid for a fortnight ... well after a fortnight they'd had enough. Couldn't pick, couldn't do nothing. And that's all they'd gone down there for wasn't it? A bit of bun money wasn't it? Money for luxuries ... They used to have to work hard, and not for that much.

When they tallied at the end of each day [worked out the day's earnings], you'd never get that much down on your card. Plenty of them had nothing to start with. They'd have a sub almost as soon as they got down there ... But then I think we really enjoyed it. I did. I did enjoy it.

Mrs T But when you think of it these days. It was a working holiday, wasn't it? It wasn't much of holiday for adults really I suppose. But it was for the younger ones.

Mrs R I don't know the reasons they still go [her cousins who still work on a mechanized farm]. They don't need the money. My C still goes down to them for weekends. It's just like having a chalet I suppose. See it's what you've always classed as your holiday. Even though sometimes it was a bit rough, it was your holiday.

And as Mrs AA said:

> I don't know how they even knew [about particular farms but I suppose it was in the family before them]. It's always been there. Like me, I first got to know of it 'cos I was always taken. To me it was the expected thing, at a certain time of the year, to go hopping.

Extract from '**Lost Voices**' by Gilda O'Neill, first published by Arrow Books in 2006

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Personal Hopping Narratives

Name: EVELYN HAZARD Age: 65

Email: evejhaz@gmail.com

Phone: 020 8597 3920

Current Location: DAGENHAM. 59 INSKIP ROAD

Notes/Memories: I WOULD LIKE TO GO ON TRIP IN SEPTEMBER.

MY FAMILY WENT TO NEW BARN FARM IN YALDING FOR MANY YEARS. I HAVE A PHOTO OF MY NAN, MUM AND SISTERS TAKEN IN THE HOPFIELD IN 1925 WHEN MY MUM WAS NINE.

I LIVED WITH MY FAMILY IN STEPNEY AND WE WENT HOPPING EVERY YEAR.

I REMEMBER ONE YEAR WHEN ME AND MY NAN TRAVELLED TO KENT IN THE BACK OF A LORRY. WE WERE EACH SEATED ON CHAIRS, SURROUNDED BY POTS AND PANS AND OTHER THINGS NEEDED FOR THE STAY.

WHEN WE ARRIVED AT THE FARM, HOPPERS PREPARED THEIR HUTS TO MAKE THEM ~~LIVEABLE~~ HABITABLE.

MY NAN'S MUM WENT HOPPING IN THE 19TH CENTURY TO A PLACE CALLED BARMING IN KENT.

MANUAL HOP PICKING ENDED AT MOST FARMS IN THE EARLY 1960'S. WHEN MACHINE PICKING CAME IN.

Year/Approx: 1948-1960

Hop farm: NEW BARN FARM. YALDING, KENT

Do you know others?

Hopping Reminiscing Sessions: Evelyn Hazard

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Personal Hopping Narratives

Name: FRANCES CHANDLER Age: 77

Email:

Phone: 0208 594 9291

Current Location: BARKING ESSEX

Notes/Memories:

Went to Syndale Valley Farm Ospringe Kent. It was our annual holiday. Farmers name was Kinch or Lynch. Favourite pastime was going scrumping

Photos 2007

Stayed in the village during 2WW.

Attended school on Water Lane.

Hop picking was the best - for freedom - fresh fruit, veg, eggs and all the produce that was still on ration and could not get in London.

Hop picking was the first time I realised that walnuts grew in England - not just America and other countries.

Year/Approx: 1945

Hop farm: SYNDALE VALLEY FARM. OSPRINGE KENT

Do you know others? QUEENS COURT OSPRINGE KENT

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Personal Hopping Narratives

SHARON AYLWARD

Name: JEAN AYLWARD nee WILLSON Age: CHILD

Email: sharaylarch6@btinternet.com

Phone: 0208 517 8986

Current Location: 169 BONHAM RD DAGENHAM ESSEX RM8 3BJ

Notes/Memories:

Photo of members of the Willson & Hutton Family all Related

Top Left to Right George William Hutton BORN 1926

ELLEN MARGARET LEWINGTON nee WILLSON (NELLIE) BORN 1910

FLORENCE ADA HUTTON BORN 1924

FLORENCE ADA HUTTON nee WILLSON BORN 1901

GEORGE HUTTON BORN 1901 EILEEN HUTTON BORN 1933

BOTTOM Left to Right JOHN HENRY HUTTON BORN 1930

ALFRED CHARLES WILLSON (ALFIE) BORN 1930

JEAN WILLSON BORN 2 SEPT 1933

ELIZABETH AGNES WILLSON nee FOX BORN 1903 (LIZZIE)

(FLORENCE ADA & ELLEN MARGARET WERE SISTERS THERE BROTHER MARRIED Elizabeth Agnes FOX

(4 of the children ARE FLORENCE ADA & GEORGE HUTTON CHILDREN ALFIE & JEAN ARE ELIZABETH & ALFRED CHILDREN)

Year/Approx: 1930S — last time after the WAR

Hop farm:

Do you know others? not in Photo

(BELIEVE PHOTO IS SEPT 1935 MUST BE BEFORE CHRISTMAS 1935 AS FLORENCE ADA HUTTON THE MOTHER DIED AT THIS TIME

Hopping Reminiscing Sessions: Jean Aylward

Photo courtesy of Maureen Hostler

Hop Picking Trip: Photo Credit Nick Matthews Photography

Photo courtesy of Bill Brown

Hop Picking Trip: Photo Credit Elena Heatherwick

Photo courtesy of Violet Charlton

Hop Picking Trip: Photo Credit Elena Heatherwick

The Company Drinks 2018 Range: Photo credit Jennifer Balcombe

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