

VILLAGE ECHOES

Once Goudhurst and the surrounding villages were crowded with hop pickers during the harvest season. The majority came from the east end of London, lesser numbers from Brighton or the more local towns such as Tonbridge or Maidstone.

The living conditions provided for them in the early days were terrible. Some farmers put up old ex-army bell tents, many of which leaked. On other farms the pickers lived in barns, cart sheds, cowsheds or in some cases old pigsties. Often these buildings were not cleaned out, just a layer of straw spread over the existing muck. One man who tried to improve their lot was Rev Joseph J. Kendon (founder of Bethany School) who came to Goudhurst in 1861. In 1868 the Rev Kendon formed the Weald of Kent Hop Pickers Mission, arranging for like-minded men and women to come to Kent to work amongst the hop pickers helping with their moral & medical welfare. By 1889 Joseph Kendon had at least 13 missionaries working not only in Goudhurst & Curtisden Green but in Lamberhurst, Marden, Horsmonden and Yalding. In the years that followed, farmers provided better accommodation in the form of either corrugated iron, wooden or brick huts. Cook-houses were also built so the hoppers could cook under cover. Latrines were provided as well as a clean water supply.

The Weald of Kent Mission erected corrugated iron buildings known as Hop Pickers' Shelters for use as medical centres during the week and religious services on Sunday. One shelter was situated at the bottom of Clay Hill opposite the Kilndown road, another at Curtisden Green. A third shelter was erected by the mission in Horsmonden. The Curtisden Green shelter was used as a temporary shop by the Powell family whilst their own shop was being enlarged in 1903. At some point this shelter burnt down and was replaced. The shelter opposite the Kilndown turning was used out of the hop picking season by Goudhurst Brass Band for their practice evenings. It was also used by Goudhurst Scouts to store waste paper they collected for the war effort during WW2. This waste paper included a whole tea chest full of unsold 1935 Goudhurst Jubilee books, now worth a lot of money. With the coming of mechanisation in the late 1950s leading to the large reduction of labour, the shelters were no longer needed. The one at Clay Hill was moved to Crowbourne Farm where it was used as a store shed. It was finally demolished when the oast house was converted to a dwelling. Goudhurst & Kilndown Local History Society has photos of a couple of these shelters taken in 1905, unfortunately not very good quality. The buildings were prefabricated and could be bought from London department stores such as Gamages. They were to be found all over England, very often used as chapels or village halls.

Many different organisations for the welfare of the hoppers operated in Kent over the years including the Red Cross who, according to some books, took over the Weald Mission in the early 1920s but Alfred Tiffin in his Goudhurst Jubilee Book (1935) gives details of the mission in 1934. The secretary & treasurer was Samuel Kendon, son of Joseph. It states that eighteen missionaries were employed as well as eight nurses working at seven medical centres plus a number of voluntary workers. Many farms had a hut kept especially for medical use; one stood for many years on the right hand side of Spelmonden Hill until it fell into disrepair and was finally demolished a few years ago.

Local History Society