



The good old days: hop-picking fun in 1951, left, and a whiff of nostalgia for 97-year-old Lizzie Fry, who has been coming to the hop gardens of Kent for 80 years

East Enders are still hopping into the past

by Greg Neale Environment Correspondent

EIGHTY years since she first visited the hop gardens, Lizzie Fry still recalls the late summer days before the First World War. Now 97, she says: "I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't come here each year."

Mrs Fry is almost certainly the oldest survivor of the legendary excursions London's East Enders have made each year as casual labourers in the Kent hop gardens. This

weekend is the English Hops Festival and she is there again.

England's hop industry is changing. The days of the East Enders' migrations are largely gone, killed off by mechanisation, rising prices and the fall in demand for traditional hops fuelled by the modern taste for lager. Next year, trials begin on growing new dwarf hops, more disease-resistant, which will

require less spraying, and fewer casual labourers. Meanwhile, a handful of families still make the journey for a few weeks of working holiday; a tradition that dates back to the last century.

In the hop gardens, the accents are changing. Young migrants from Poland and Spain work with students

augmenting their grants for £2.69 an hour (£4.03 overtime). But some of the Cockney survives.

At Mr Julian Berry's farm near Selling, Kent, Mrs Elizabeth Hart, 77, is still working at the hop machine, picking out the leaves and "sprig" that must be removed before the hops go to the oast house

for drying and pressing. Her daughter, Mrs Margaret Whitwell, 52, from Plaistow, east London, works in the fields, helping to cut the bines from their 16ft wire-and-string trellises.

"I've been coming since I was a little girl," Mrs Whitwell says. "One of my children was born when I was working down here."

Mr Berry, whose family have farmed in the district for more than 150 years, said: "One advantage of people

the number of hop farms, further reducing the demand for labour which had begun with mechanisation in the 1960s. Tractors now lift hop-pickers to the tops of the bines, and pickers no longer use stilts.

In 1947 there were 2,000 hop farmers; the figure is now 373. Oast houses are now likely to be fashionable homes for commuters.

Social patterns have also changed among the hop-pickers. Nowadays, East Enders fly to Spain for their holidays.