

**HOP-PICKING AT NELSON.**

Long before the sun makes his appearance over the eastern hills many a household is astir during this busy hop-picking time. The necessary housework is put through in double-quick time, while outside milking, pig-feeding, etc., is done with a smartness which surprises everyone, and a hasty breakfast is snatched, and mother having well-filled the family dinner-basket, a start is made for the hop-garden.

The delightful freshness of the clear autumn morning makes everyone feel fresh and lively. Across the fields, sparkling with a million dew-brilliant, our friends go, and in a short

time reach the scene of operations. Lively greetings are exchanged with the other pickers, wraps are soon off, the boys' coats too, down comes a well-laden pole on to the bin, and nimble fingers are soon at pole-picking the golden hops. The lively good humour, the jokes and banter, crisp and keen as the morning air itself, gradually subsides as the day wears on, and the whole company settle down to steady work.

Life in the hopfields never gets monotonous; of course, social gossip has its whisperings, and local incidents are well discussed, but the work in itself, the record number of bushels picked, etc., claim a large share of attention. Frequently a pole almost breaking under its load is picked into

the bushel measure, and during the present season single poles have yielded two and three bushels of hops.

Probably the most important individual in the hopfield is the one told off to measure. As soon as pole-pulling is stopped the hops in the bins are well cleaned of leaves, each picker being anxious to be the first to get measured up. The size of the bushel basket (or tin) varies in different localities. Two sizes are used—in some gardens the eight gallon, and in others the ten gallon measure. It would be far better for all concerned if growers would agree to use a measure of uniform size. A good deal of trouble occasionally arises as to the prices paid for picking, which, in some localities, vary from year to year. At the be-

ginning of the present hop-picking season something approaching a strike took place in one or two gardens. These intended to use the ten gallon measure and proposed to give 24d per bushel. However, the assembled pickers had decided not to pick for less than 3d, so, after a delay of an hour or so the growers gave way and conceded the extra halfpenny. The price generally agreed upon this time is 24d for 8 gallon measure, and 3d for 10 gallon. These rates are very nearly equal, the advantage being (from a grower's point of view) in favour of the 10 gallon measure, but only to the extent of 1d for every 80 bushels. The question as to the price of picking is a burning one at the present time. The growers think they pay too much, while the pickers are persuaded that they earn every penny they get. A good picker is able to earn at present rates 5/ and upwards a day. In one garden (and doubtless many similar cases exist elsewhere) I know of a young girl in her teens earning 7/ a day and over, while the pole-puller (man) has to be content with his 6/. Some families are earning from £1 to 30/ a day, and as picking has been going on for a month or more, and it is likely to last another fortnight, it will be seen that these people will get a nice little cheque when pay-day comes along.

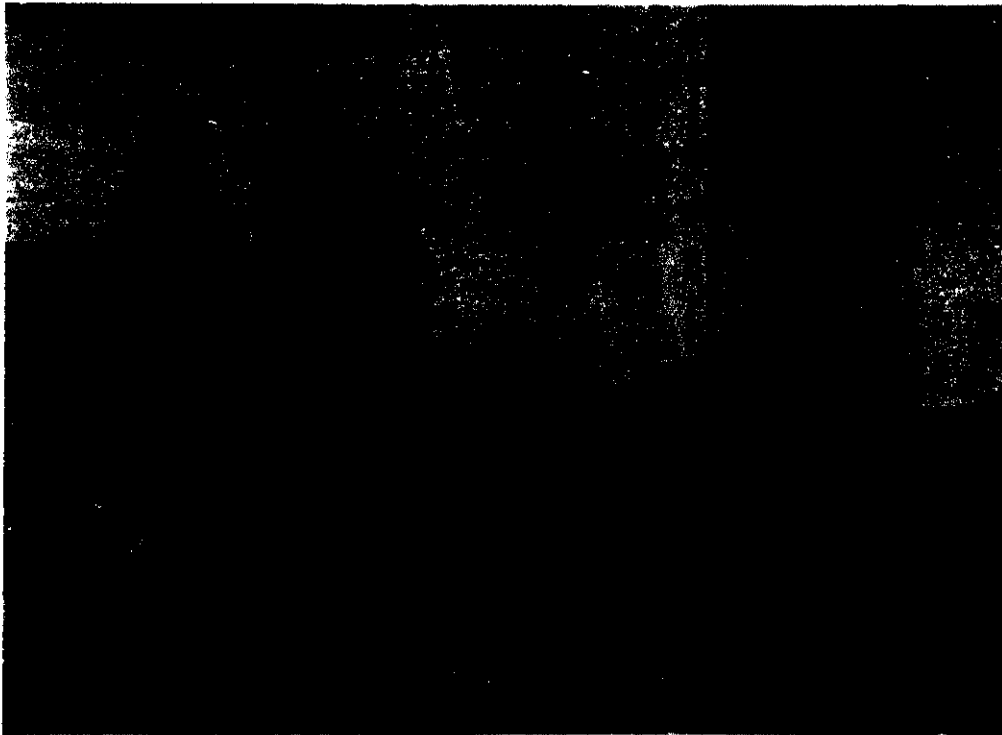
The estimated yield this year is put down at 5,000 bales, against 2,000 odd last year, the crop being good everywhere, and probably the heaviest on record. As the prices for picking are not uniform it is impossible to say very accurately as to the total cost of picking, but a rough estimate, that cannot be far out, may be put down at £15,000. This sum will be circulated among the pickers within the next month or so. Hops are now selling at 9d a lb, with a hesitating market, so that, with a 5,000 bale estimate, the return to growers is not likely to exceed £60,000. But while this estimate in all probability will never be realised, as most dealers prophesy lower rates, still it must be remembered that the pickers are sure of the £15,000. Thus it will be seen that the growers will pay at least one-quarter of the gross income derived from the sale of their crops in getting the hops picked. Growers argue that the proportion allotted to pickers is too much, and that in no other crop do workers get anything like the above for harvesting. In some years the growers and the pickers make an agreement that if growers get over 1/ a lb 3d per bushel be paid for picking; if less 2d be paid; and this appears to be a much fairer way. No one could grumble if the picking price were made a fixed proportion of the average market rate ruling when picking is completed. The wonderful crops this year ripened quickly, and it was imperatively that picking be got through expeditiously, so pickers had the 'whip hand' and dictated their own terms.

In the Fox Hill and Belgrove districts picking and drying are undertaken by one or two firms. These were unable to cope with the unusually heavy crops, so that it is said it was decided by lot which gardens should be taken first, and those left out suffered from being over-ripe.

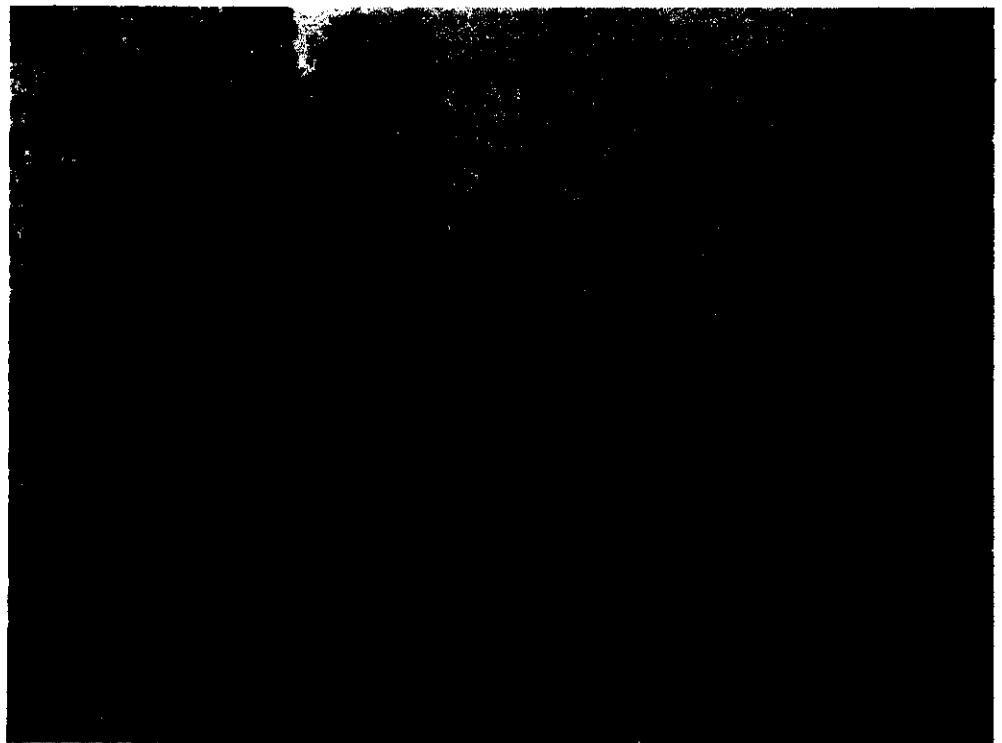
The hops grown in Nelson are usually classed under three headings—Brown bine, green bine, and Bumford's. The first is an early hop and a large variety. This year they showed up better in 'condition' than usual, and were very heavy everywhere. The green bine, called by some Goding's, include several varieties and are heavy croppers. The Bumford's are late hops. They pick hard, but are good from a grower's side, being firm and weighing well.

This season crops go considerably over a bushel to the hill (two poles usually go to a hill), and the average per acre for the district will probably lie between 16 to 19 cwt.—an exceptionally good crop. The hops this year, though well-grown and a splendid sample, do not weigh quite so well as in some seasons, and will probably not run much over 140 to the bushel when dried.

The scene in the garden when all the pickers are at work is full of life and colour, and one that is worthy of any artist's attention. In the evening it is dusk before the last pickers get measured up. Some camp near the scene of operations, and in the twilight the cheery fire outside, the pickers grouped here and there, the dulcet notes of concertina, etc., and the voices of young singers form a charming country picture.



HOP-PICKING AT FOXHILL, NELSON



A HOP-GARDEN AT FOXHILL, NELSON.

Brunn Witt, photos.