

Mac and Don arrived when hops were still picked by hand. There was labour for able-bodied incomers, from planting to harvest, six months of piece work if you stretched it out. Photos from the period show a happy couple in their early thirties settling into country life: at the front gate of an eighteenth-century tiled cottage, 1950; a picnic on the South Downs when Lulu is five, 1952; Mac leaning on a hoe, Lulu camera-shy between them, Don dressed rather jauntily for the garden, 1950.

When the mud turned cold, and the hop pickers went back to Canning Town themselves, Mac scavenged for work in winter. Don skivvied, Mac fixed vehicles and exterminated pests. He shot crows, poisoned moles, ratted barns, trapped magpies, ferreted rabbits and beat for the guns and redcoats.

By the time I was born in the summer of 1955, the Petleys were living in a council house in Hawkhurst, still a sleepy village off Mr Jones the butcher's A21, halfway between Hastings and Tunbridge Wells, a postwar overspill for demobbed country workers. On my birth certificate, Mac's occupation is *rodent operative*. The new red-brick council estates were a haven for the drifters of 1945, men and women cut loose from pre-war ties by duty, chaos, the scattering of war. Down All Saints Road we had a Welsh miner, a Scottish spinster, an East End boxer and the Kiwi with his Cockney. Mac wasn't the only rat catcher. There were three ex-gamekeepers and enough Land Army women who'd trapped and ratted for victory before going back to boiling their sheets. In fact it was All Saints and Sinners Road; a gypsy family of ten who carved wooden tent pegs, men who worked in the gypsum mine, an engraver, a retired Sheffield tram driver, a chimney sweep, a nurseryman, estate gardeners laid off on the eve of war, bus drivers, dustmen, coalmen, milkmen, widows and wounded. There were craftsmen too, cobblers, watch repairers, furniture makers. But most were labourers: on local farms where the tied cottages were being sold off; at the wood turners beside the railway station where they made the hop poles; or just chippies, brickies and plasterers for the new 'gentlemen' builders. The women worked in the village shops, the laundry or the egg-packing plant. Or, like Don, they did seasonal work on the fruit farms and skivvied for the district's burgeoning middle classes. The aristocracy had fled, their mansions left empty after housing convalescing troops. Their estates were divided into farmland or secured for the new council estates. All Saints Road, Park Cottages, Basden, Wellington Cottages, Red Oaks. In secure housing at low rent, the idea was that working families could settle down in rural tranquillity and prosper under the new Welfare State. But not the Macs of this world. The bitterness of poverty and stifling hierarchies on foreign soil had begun to set Mac against himself.