

# Researching the history of the Women's Land Army

Stuart Antrobus

**D**espite the misleading title 'Army', the Women's Land Army was a civilian agency under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, created to channel young, paid women volunteers (soon referred to as 'land girls') into work on the land during the Second World War, to replace those men called up to do military service<sup>1</sup>. Over 200,000 young women served in the WLA between 1939 and 1950. Few counties, however, have had their WLA activities recorded in detail by local historians.

Having recently researched the WLA's activities in Bedfordshire, I am keen to encourage others to do the same in their county and can suggest some useful sources for productive research. In this article I also give examples of some of my research methods.

## Local sources

As with any local research topic, one's own county record office<sup>2</sup> (CRO) is the first point of call. What is found there will depend, clearly, on what has been deposited, but, unless one is very lucky, it will not be the official archives of the local WLA county office. Sometime after the disbandment of the WLA in November 1950, the official archives, certainly the bulk of the national ones, appear to have been destroyed.

What one will find are those documents – letters, photographs, proficiency certificates, release certificates, and so on – deposited by individuals, often former 'land girls'. If these include papers from those who were voluntary members of the WLA county committee,

they may be useful in giving an insight into the administration of the organisation, locally.

What is most likely is that the papers of the County War Agricultural Executive Committee<sup>3</sup> (CWAEC) will be in your CRO, giving information on matters to do with the CWAEC's employment of land girls and accommodation in hostels set up around the county, either in requisitioned houses or purpose-



*Nola Bagley, from Brightlingsea, Essex, was sent to serve in the Women's Land Army in Bedfordshire in 1943. Many of the land girls, minimum age 17½ years, had studio photographs taken in their distinctive uniform.*

built hutments. Once armed with the names of those hostels, one can then trace where they were and seek further documentation. Most of the requisitioned country houses or training farms are likely to be still there, although some may have been destroyed. The huts are most unlikely to have survived and their exact location needs to be checked, firstly from local people or surviving 'land girls' who stayed there, then by use of 1950s Ordnance Survey maps which will record their shape and position and pinpoint location with an O.S. reference number.

Immediate post-war RAF aerial photographs (1946-48), accessible either in your county's historic environment (or sites and monuments) record or through the Aerial Photo Collection of the National Monuments Record at Swindon (now part of English Heritage<sup>4</sup>), can then be checked to provide actual images of the hutment hostels from above and the remains, if any, can be searched for on the ground.

## Oral history and memoirs<sup>5</sup>

Hostels were only half the story, since most land girls were employed directly by private farmers, and billeted either on a farm or with local farm workers in nearby houses. Here, one is dependent on any diaries or oral history accounts by former land girls and their farm employers. Local farmers who were children during the war may remember their father employing land girls and give their perspective.



*A mobile gang of land girls from Milton Ernest hostel, Bedfordshire. They were employed by Bedfordshire 'War Ag' to work, as required, on local farms and market gardens.*

People, especially former 'land girls', proved to be the most important primary sources for my investigation of the WLA in Bedfordshire. Initially I was able to get together about 20 former Bedfordshire WLA members when I gave a talk in Bedford Central Library on the WLA nationally. These were then able to suggest other surviving former colleagues around the country and they in turn put me in touch with others. By the use of a single-sided A4 questionnaire, I was able to record their service details and solicit further useful contacts.

I have now produced, four years later, a list of over 850 names of young women who served in Bedfordshire WLA and have had over 180 of my questionnaire forms completed by surviving land girls. Equally vital, many of these women were willing to donate, or loan for copying, photographs and documents they had kept from their period in the WLA. Although apparently of little significance alone, together with those of others these enabled me to understand and illustrate aspects of WLA and CWAEC (or the 'War Ag', as it was often referred to) administration.

#### Reminiscence

The next stage was to hold reminiscence sessions with small groups of women who had previously served in the same hostels or who had served on private farms. This enabled both particular questions to be asked and background information to be

gleaned, as well as giving a general picture of conditions for 'land girls', whether during the war, or in the post-war period of food shortages. In addition, by encouraging them to bring along their photographs or albums from that period, I was able to make photocopies or scan them digitally to begin an archive. Former 'land girls' helped each other to name individuals in those photographs and, where possible, give subsequent married names. I then recorded these and noted sources.

#### Recorded interviews

In addition to this I interviewed a number of these women individually and, when they agreed, recorded those interviews. This first-hand testimony will be of help to future generations of historians, both local and national, and I therefore deposited copies of 18 of them in the Sound Archive of the Imperial War Museum, as well as locally, so that access to them was increased. The Oral History Society<sup>6</sup> provides useful advice on correct procedures and techniques when conducting oral history interviews, as well as an ethical code.

<p>COUNTY OF BEDFORDSHIRE WAR AGRICULTURAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE</p>	
<p><b>This is to Certify that</b></p> <p><i>Hilda Mabel Bright</i></p> <p>has qualified as Forewoman in the services of the above Committee</p>	
<p>GRADE <u>2</u></p>	<p>Signed: <i>[Signature]</i> Executive Officer.</p> <p><i>[Signature]</i> Labour Officer.</p>
<p>Date <i>Dec 12 1944</i></p>	

*Land girls who took on a supervisory role with hostel gangs had to attend a Forewoman course organised by the county 'War Ag'.*



WOMEN'S LAND ARMY PROFICIENCY CERTIFICATE.

THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

Miss E.M.B. Dary W.L.A. No. 36558

HAS BEEN AWARDED A PROFICIENCY BADGE

IN General Farm Work AND HAS GAINED DISTINCTION.

Date July 1917

Signed [Signature] on behalf of the Women's Land Army.

Proficiency certificate. These were issued after on-the-job assessments by local farmers.

Timber Corps

These former 'land girls' were vital in my research, both as sources of personal experience but also in raising topics and issues for further research and in answering particular questions which documentary evidence raised. Although it appears that there were not any Timber Corps members (1942-46) in Bedfordshire, in other counties those

who served in this specialist branch of the WLA may still be around to tell their particular story of work in forests and sawmills, since some 6000 served in the Timber Corps, working directly for the Ministry of Supply in England and the Department of Agriculture in Scotland.

Local newspapers and magazines

Next in importance as a valuable source for research are local newspapers for the period 1939-50, where one can search for news items, articles and photographs relating to the WLA and its members. These, in my case, provided further names for my Roll Call list, brought up the names of hostels and provided vital material for a growing timeline of WLA developments in the county. Further material can be gained from autobiographical articles or memoirs contained within local magazines or reminiscence anthologies by retirement groups and Women's Institutes locally.

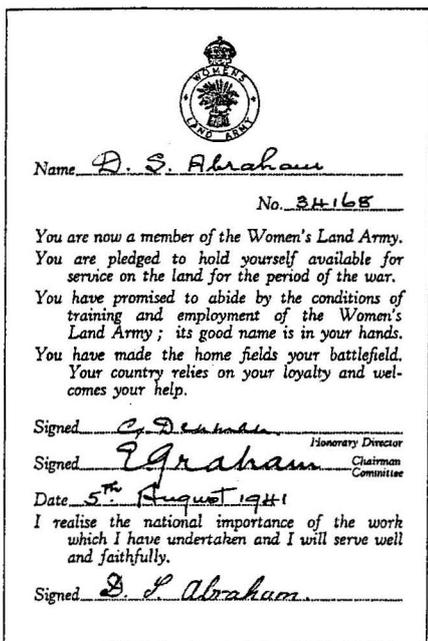
National archives

Those three elements of people, periodicals and photographs, were vital, in addition to official documents, in helping me to piece

together, like a detective, the story of the Women's Land Army in Bedfordshire. Parallel with local research was research using the national and specialist archives and libraries. Of these the most useful are the National Archives (NA) at Kew, the Imperial War Museum (IWM) in London and at Duxford, the Museum of English Rural Life (MERL) at Reading and the Women's Library at London Metropolitan University. Each of these institutions provide online catalogues which enable you to prepare in advance of a visit and request relevant material.

The National Archives hold the government papers from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, under whose aegis both the WLA and the CWAECs operated, as well as other departments. They give an insight to the administration of those bodies and the difficulties they operated under during wartime conditions and, if you are lucky, may refer to your particular county. In addition, the National Archives holds a microfilm version of the only remaining part of the original WLA archives, that of the card index to the personnel files, with names of former land girls listed alphabetically by surname (usually maiden name).

The Imperial War Museum holds a wide range of material in its various departments - printed books, documents, art, photographs, film and sound recordings - relating to the WLA both nationally and, if you are fortunate, relating to your particular county. In the case of Bedfordshire, unfortunately, little material had been deposited relating to it, which was the spur that encouraged me to persevere and actually to produce such material myself. What the IWM did provide, after searching its film catalogue, was rare newsreel footage of the post-war WLA victory parade in Bedford, graced by the presence of Princess Elizabeth, our present Queen. It also, through its Duxford site, enables research of the actual index slips relating to the WLA



A WLA pledge card. Land girls signed up for the duration of the war. Some continued after the war.



By this personal message I wish to express to you

Miss R. Richards, W.L.A. 148331

my appreciation of your loyal and devoted service as a member of the Women's Land Army from 1st July, 1944 to 31st May, 1946.

Your unsparing efforts at a time when the victory of our cause depended on the utmost use of the resources of our land have earned for you the country's gratitude.

Elizabeth R

There were no medals for land girls. A congratulatory certificate signed by Queen Elizabeth was the only acknowledgement they might receive after their war service.

personnel file (of which the NA has a microfilm version).

MERL at the University of Reading has a superb collection of WLA photographs (search for those taken in your county) as well as journals relating to agriculture covering the wartime period, which help one to understand the difficulties under which farmers and the CWAECs worked, employing both land girls and prisoners of war, as well as part-time workers such as those in the Emergency Land Corps or Auxiliary Land Army.

### The Land Girl magazine

The most important single source, apart from the personnel documents, is the full run of the periodical *The Land Girl* (TLG), and its successor, *Land Army News*, of which the National Archives hold some copies but The Women's Library holds the entire run. *The Land Girl* ran from April 1940 – March 1947, published monthly by the Women's Land Army, from its national headquarters at Balcombe Place, Haywards Heath,

Sussex. There was a short break in 1947, due a paper shortage, before its successor periodical, *Land Army News*, was published, from June 1947 to November 1950, and the end of the organisation.

Not only does reading these – the WLA's own house journals – provide a unique insight into the WLA as an organisation, but through TLG's monthly 'County News' section the researcher is able to pick up key developments for a particular county. In reality, because of the WLA's 51 'counties' to be covered in England and Wales, it enabled each county to submit items every other month. Through a separate monthly listing, recording the actual number of women employed (as opposed to enlisted) in each county, one can produce tables and create a graph showing the rise and fall in county numbers. This can then be related to key issues in the national picture, such as the slow start due to farmer reluctance to employ 'land girls', the subsequent winning over as they proved their worth on the land, then the enormous increase in numbers as the war progressed and female conscription (effectively from 1942 onwards) obliged women to opt for one national service as opposed to another. It is also worth skimming through the correspondence section

of TLG for letters from one's own county, and also for photographs submitted by individuals, since the correspondents' county and WLA numbers as well as names are given. *Land Army News* is less useful from the point of view of the local historian, in that it does not give monthly enrolment figures, nor 'County News' but records the post-war organisation nationally.

### Sound and oral history archives

Finally, do search for previously recorded interviews with former 'land girls' from your county, both locally, via your local museum, county record office or regional oral history archive, as well as nationally through the Imperial War Museum and other national oral history archives, such as the British Library Sound Archive. Catalogues are usually available online.

### Using the Internet

Online research is an indispensable aid to the local historian, often saving both the time and expense involved in travelling large distances to libraries and archives. Simply putting keywords into, say, Google will often bring up just what you need. Try entering 'Bedfordshire Women's Land Army', for example, which brings up my own site, courtesy of



The Land Girl magazine heading illustration, September 1944.

Bedfordshire Libraries, or 'Women's Land Army'<sup>12</sup>, which brings up sites such as *The Wartime Memories Project*. A particularly useful source is the BBC's *WW2 People's War* web site<sup>13</sup>, which is an archive of 47,000 personal stories written by the public and gathered by the BBC. This can be searched geographically or by topic, for example, giving 225 Land Army stories, nationally. These can then be searched for relevant local material, which sometimes includes photographs.

Researching the Women's Land Army in your county could be a very rewarding project involving both documents and people, as it has been for me, and might prove to be a valuable contribution to both women's history and the history of wartime agriculture in Britain, as well as your local county's history.

#### Notes

1. *The Women's Land Army* by Vita Sackville-West (Michael Joseph, 1944) Imperial War Museum,

1997. Also see 'Further Reading' web page on Bedfordshire Libraries' internet site (below) for published histories on the WLA
2. [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archon) for a directory of UK record repositories and A2A (Access to Archives) which gives online catalogues for 408 record offices in England and Wales.
3. See the author's article on 'County War Agricultural Committees' (Bedfordshire Libraries internet site, below)
4. [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)
5. See the British Library online integrated catalogue for published land girl memoirs relating to various counties: [www.bl.uk](http://www.bl.uk) (Search by entering 'women's land army' as keywords)
6. [www.ohs.org.uk](http://www.ohs.org.uk)
7. *Meet the Members: a record of the Timber Corps of the Women's Land Army (WLA 1945?)* Imperial War Museum, 1997

8. [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk)
9. [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk)
10. [www.ruralhistory.org](http://www.ruralhistory.org)
11. [www.londonmet.ac.uk/the-womenslibrary](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/the-womenslibrary)
12. Use the Advanced Search 'without the words' facility to find results which exclude 'australian', 'canadian', 'new zealand', 'united states' to avoid references to the Women's Land Army in those countries.
13. [www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar](http://www.bbc.co.uk/ww2peopleswar)

Stuart Antrobus is currently writing a book on the history of Bedfordshire Women's Land Army. Meanwhile, you can view a large amount of his archive material and background articles on the Internet, through the 'Local and Family History' web pages of Bedfordshire Libraries' Virtual Library site: [www.bedfordshire.gov.uk](http://www.bedfordshire.gov.uk) click on Libraries (follow the links to 'The history of Bedfordshire Women's Land Army') Illustrations from the Antrobus collection. 

## 'On the Move' in Local History

Dr Trevor James

**H**ave you ever noticed how the construction of a new shopping mall in a town always transforms the focus of local shopping? The most extreme case in modern times has been the creation and operation of the Merry Hill Shopping Centre which at one time threatened to devastate the commercial centre of nearby Dudley as shoppers flocked to the new and brighter options at Merry Hill. In other words the focal point of local trade and business was seen simply to move.

Movement is a constant feature which we can detect throughout local history. During my recent visit to Kendal, in the former Westmorland, I sensed two forms of movement. To the north of the town

on a ridge is a clearly defined 11th Century motte and bailey castle but this was superseded in the 12th Century by the construction of a more elaborate stone castle on a glacial drumlin which overlooks the town and the River Kent to the south. What we see here is that the original site selection was valid in its own time but those who wished to dominate and protect Kendal subsequently identified this significantly better site, so the defensive focus of Kendal moved across to the other side of the River Kent. Equally in the same town, Kendal's parish church is located in an area known as Kirklands – self-evident as it is – which was the

original settlement and this is where the original market place would have been. However in medieval times the lords of the manor decided to create a new town further to the east, where the present town hall and market place are to be found. So the north-south defensive realignment was matched by a west-east urban movement.

This is not an isolated instance. In Jack Simmons' *Leicester: Past and Present* he indicates that an early medieval Leicester market place was alongside the ancient parish church of St Nicholas – the latter patronage being one that can now be clearly associated with the merchant community – in what is now known