

The WWI *Land Girls*

During **WWI**, women volunteered to work on the land but there were still not enough to take over the roles of **100,000 men who had gone to war**. In 1917, Meriel Talbot created the **Women's Land Army** and this month, we speak with historian Cherish Watton to find out more about the **Land Girls** in our area...

During the first world war, over 100,000 British men who worked on the land had gone to war. Farmers were finding it hard to carry out their seasonal work and not enough food was being produced.

To help, women started to volunteer to work on the land as part of voluntary societies, such as the Women's National Land Service Corps which was formed in February 1916. However, there were still not enough of them to do the work previously carried out by the men.

"Committees were formed in each county to try to increase the amount of food being produced in each area, but these committees were reluctant to encourage the use of women," explained Cherish Watton, Historian and editor for The Women's Land Army website.

"This was because they thought that women would not be able to do the physically demanding work like the men could."

The Government's Board of Agriculture tried to change men's prejudices regarding women working on the land by organising demonstrations and competitions, which showed that women could perform a range of farm roles competently.



Main: The area's land girls were determined to dig for victory - here, they're helping to keep the country well fed.

Following these local demonstrations, a new Department for Food Production was created, and in January 1917, a Women's Branch was established under a Director, Meriel Talbot.

Meriel set to work to establish local civilian women's labour force of mobile workers called the Women's Land Army to recruit, train for four weeks and channel healthy young women over 18 years of age into working on local farms in March 1917.

"Young women, most over the age of 20, who applied to join the Women's Land Army were interviewed by a selection committee. This involved assessing their aptitude for physical work and a medical examination. Those who could demonstrate previous training or experience would be sent directly to a farm which needed labour."

Untrained but 'strong and healthy' recruits were sent to a WLA training centre on selected farms around England and Wales. By September 1917, there were 247 of these training centres.

'Land girls', as they came to be known, took on milking, care of livestock and general work on farms. They were paid 18 shillings a week, which increased to 20 shillings a week after they passed an efficiency test.

Between March 1917 and May 1919, 23,000 women successfully passed through training centres to become official members of the Women's Land Army, a small but significant part of the 300,000 women who by 1918 were working on the land.

There were three sections within the WLA: agriculture, forage and timber cutting. The majority who worked in agriculture were milkers and field workers, but some were carters, ploughwomen and market gardeners.

Agriculture training could take up to six weeks, and consisted of the correct use of farm implements, milking, the care of young livestock and working with horses. For some it also included mole trapping, farriery or thatching hay and straw stacks. Even learning to drive the newly-introduced motor tractors.

Enthusiastic and well-educated young women were chosen to become 'Gang

Leaders' who took responsibility for three to four field workers who worked as 'land girl gangs' on individual farms from June to October each year.

Timber cutting training took the same time, and involved learning how to measure trees, cutting down and stacking trees, loading and transporting timber, operating saw mills, producing pit props and other timber products for the war such as ammunition boxes and duck boards for the trenches and tree nursery cultivation and planting.

Women tasked with forage work tended to be trained on the job, including operating steam baling machines, producing bales of hay for horse feed and straw for bedding, and cutting chaff into short lengths.

"Those who signed on for a year were provided with a free uniform, but not all land girls dressed according to the official rules! The revolutionary innovation was that land girls were allowed to wear breeches to give them the same freedom of movement as men when doing physical work."

After three months' proficient service, a land girl would be presented with a green loden

"Young women who applied to join the Women's Land Army were interviewed; those who could demonstrate training or experience were sent directly to a farm."

armlet bearing a red felt crown indicating that she was on national service. There were also good service badges and chevrons which indicated the length of time and the minimum number of hours they had worked which could be added to the uniform.

Throughout the first World War, which lasted from 4th August 1914 to 11th November 1918, thousands of women helped contribute to the war effort by carrying out the work of the men whilst they were away at war.

The Women's Land Army was officially disbanded on 30th November 1919, but was re-created on 1st June 1939 in time for what was to become World War Two.



Top Left: Three land girls in uniform at The Grange, Gunthorpe, Peterborough.

Top Right: WW1 Land girl Dorothy Brown delivering milk locally, employed by Mr Brown of Gunthorpe.

Right: Four weeks training are over and local girl Iris receives her first week's pay.

Far Right: Land girls march with the banner 'Join The Land Army For Health and Happiness.' Peterborough, 14th September 1918.



The Local Land Army Girl...

Dorothy Brown, born in 1896, grew up on a farm in Gunthorpe, Peterborough. She always had an interest in horticulture, and during the war she worked as a land girl, which she loved as it gave her freedom.

Dorothy's father owned four milk floats and horses, and her parents were pleased that Dorothy was helping out on the land during the first world war. She used to deliver milk twice a day, but found it heavy work lifting churns. She enjoyed working with the horses and was responsible for putting them away at night.

Dorothy mainly worked with farmworkers and with a lady from Stockport called Mary Norman.

In her free time, she went to dances with her grandmother and she loved the rallies and having the opportunity to mix with a lot of people as it was often difficult to meet up with others because of the lack of transport.

Dorothy found it funny how men would stare at her wearing trousers when going between the alleyways of houses delivering milk. Men were not mocking when they stared, but were fascinated, as they had never seen women wear trousers before.

After the war, she didn't stay on land, but went on to become a housewife.

Shared by Valerie Linder, Dorothy's daughter.