

The Women's Land Army

Second World War
in Great Ayton

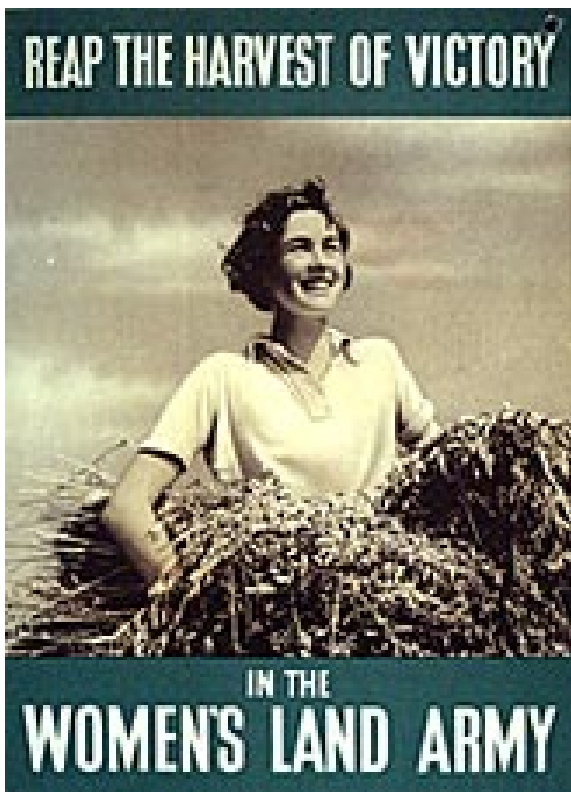


As the Second World War progressed, maximising the quantity of home-grown food was vital. There was a campaign to grow food at home under the banner “Dig for Victory”. But home-grown food couldn’t meet the need. There had been a reduction in food imports with the continent at war and submarine activity in the Atlantic. Although agriculture was a protected occupation, many farm workers had enlisted. Land previously uncultivated was now being brought into productive use. More hands were needed down on the farm.

A similar problem had arisen during the First World War. By 1917, food stocks had been reduced to barely three weeks' supply. The Women's Land Army was founded to provide more agricultural workers, and by the following year there were 23,000 women enrolled. The poster on the right dates from this period.

Acting with considerably more speed, the government re-formed the Women's Land Army on 1 June 1939, before war had been declared. This time, far more women would enrol, with WLA membership exceeding 80,000 by 1943.





Girls were attracted to the WLA for several reasons.

- 1) A desire to help the war effort without having to enlist in the armed services.
- 2) To gain independence from parents and freedom from boring work. For many girls, this was the over-riding reason, with an escape from living at home and working in a department store.
- 3) To earn some money, although pay was very low. WLA girls were paid 28 shillings a week by the farmer, but deductions were made for board and lodging. At this time male agricultural workers were on 38 shillings a week, and the average wage for all workers was 80 shillings a week.
- 4) Working with animals and an outdoor life in the country were seen as attractive, but not always, for example when watching the castration of a stallions or picking sprouts in freezing weather.

RELATIVE WORK-OUTPUTS OF WOMEN

according to the report prepared by J. H. Smith, M.Sc., Dept. of
Agricultural Economics, University College of Wales, Aberystwyth
(Output of adult male = 100)

	Relative work output		Relative work output
TENDING LIVESTOCK:		POTATO CROP:	
Poultry	101	Planting (setting)	95
Milking	91	Lifting (picking)	91
Cattle	72	Weeding	75
FIELD WORK WITH HORSES:		Riddling and sorting	85
Driving hay mower	80	Sacking	61
Horse raking	71	Loading	44
Rolling	71		
Carting	69	OTHER ROOT CROPS:	
Harrowing	68	Hoeing beet and turnips	77
Ploughing	65	Lifting swedes and turnips	70
Odd jobs	62	Lifting mangolds	68
TRACTOR WORK:			
Driving, excluding repairs	73	MARKET GARDENING:	
Driving and repairs	49	Planting brassicas	90
LOADING AND SPREADING		Cutting cabbage	83
DUNG:		Bagging and netting cab- bage	81
Loading	46	Pulling peas	103
Spreading	58	„ broad beans	96
HOEING AND WEEDING:		„ runner beans	101
Hoeing: general	75		
Weeding: general	88	COMMERCIAL HORTICUL- TURE:	
corn (miscell.)	79	Cutting flowers	106
wheat	84	Bunching „	106
barley	84	Packing „	101
HARVEST OPERATIONS:			
Turning hay	92	FRUIT PICKING:	
Self-binding	51	Plums	99
Stooking	63	Apples	95
Loading sheaves	61	Cherries	95
Rick work: hay	67	Small fruit	100
corn	64		
Threshing: general	70		
cutting bands	91		

NOTE.—It should be understood that these percentages apply to the
typical women in agriculture and not only to members of the W.L.A.

There was much debate about the work output of women compared with men. The table on the left shows the relative work outputs of women engaged in various farm jobs, prepared by the University College of Wales.

Only in pulling peas and beans, and tending poultry, did women perform marginally better. At the other end of the scale, they could only manage 46% of a man's output loading and spreading dung.

The Women's Land Army in the North Riding was organised by Miss Winifred Jacob Smith, a cattle breeder from near Knaresborough. She was very efficient, although somewhat formidable, and went on to take over WLA organisation throughout the County of Yorkshire. Some of her methods would raise a few eyebrows today. She kept an individual record card for every girl, classifying them into types and adding phrases such as:

“a particularly good type of girl”

“a strong girl but inclined to grumble”

“always grumbling”

“very fat and podgy”

“has queer brother, mother a bit difficult too “

On one occasion she visited a girl who was absent from farm work with a claimed ankle injury, only to find her “wearing fairly high heels and no trace of bandages”.



Many WLA girls lived in special hostels, such as the group above (not a local photograph). There were hostels at Stokesley and Guisborough, and local farmers would request assistance when they needed extra hands, for example at threshing time. Some girls lodged on the farm itself, some were in lodgings and some lived at home.

Hostel wardens did their best to make life pleasant for their charges. One Great Ayton Land Girl said “There were soldiers stationed at the Manor in Stokesley and there were soldiers up Station Road at a camp up there. If we had a party and you hadn’t a boy friend, she (the warden) used to count the boys up who were short and send for them. A lot met their husbands that way.”

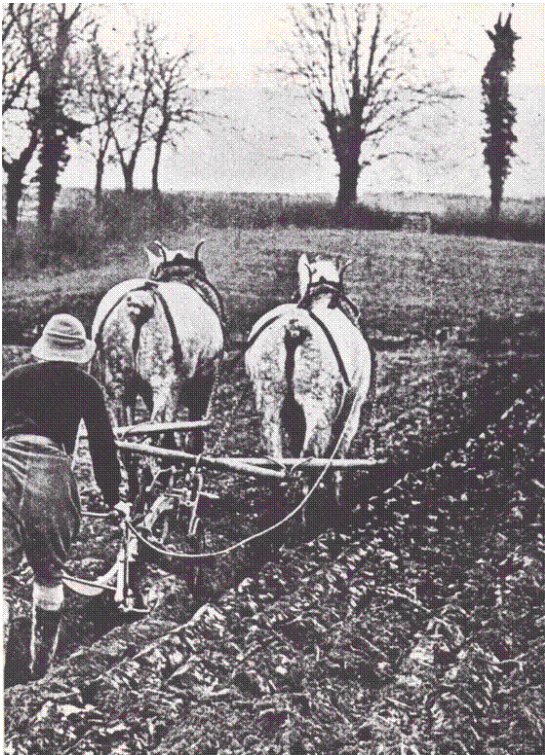
WLA Uniform issued to every girl:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|---|
| 2 green jerseys | 2 pairs of breeches | 2 overall coats |
| 2 pairs of dungarees | 6 pairs of stockings | 3 shirts |
| 1 pair of ankle boots | 1 pair of shoes | 1 pair of gumboots or boots with leggings |
| 1 overcoat with shoulder titles | | 1 oilskin or mackintosh |
| 1 oilskin sou-wester | | |
| 1 hat | | |
| 2 towels | | |
| Armlet | | |
| Metal badge | | |





The image of the life of a Land Army girl, as portrayed in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries publicity picture above left, did not always reflect the realities of the work, above right. One problem was a shortage of wellington boots; ankle boots and leggings were a poor substitute in many farm conditions.



At the start of the war, most farm work was done by horses. Harnessing a horse for the first time could be a daunting experience.

“I got the horse out of the field and you would get into the bay with with it, and the first thing it would do if you went in up the side was to turn its bottom round and cut you off with no retreat.”

As the war progressed, tractors, imported from the United States, began to appear.



Work could be arduous, as these three extracts from interviews with ex-Great Ayton Land Army girls demonstrates:

“One particular winter I had ben snagging turnips and it was frosty and I had great big blisters all over my hands and I had to go to the doctor’s in Guisborough and have them lanced.”

“Once when we’d been picking sprouts on the cliffs at Boulby, it was absolutely bitterly cold. We had mitts but by twelve o’clock our hands were frozen. So he (the farmer) said ‘Oh, my wife’s made you a bit to eat’, which she had, but it was wartime and there was rationing. It was gravy and mounds of carrots and parsnips. No meat, but it was hot.”

“A farmer or one of his helpers came up and filled this sack in front of your stomach with potatoes. And we had to walk up these ruts and plant as we were going. Our backs were about breaking. I had worked in the Drapery Department at Leeds Co-operative and the most I’d ever done was to measure women for corsets!”

A Land Army girl employed on a farm in Great Ayton described a typical day's work to Miss Jacob Smith when she visited her in 1946:

7:00 – 8:00	Milking and bottling
8:30 – 11:00	Milk round
11:00 – 12:00	Washing bottles
1:00-3:00	Feed calves, field work
3:00 – 4:30	Milking
4:30 – 5:00	Wash up milking machines

Miss Jacob Smith added the following comments

“She hates the milk round. Before joining the WLA she delivered meat for a butcher and joined the WLA to get away from this. Is happy on the farm otherwise. Thought she would like a job in a hostel near home but I told her this impossible. Very clear and very young type of girl.”



(Photograph not from Great Ayton)

Hard farm work and basic accommodation were enlivened by opportunities for romance. An Ayton farmer remembered that to get anywhere with a Land Army girl you had to get past her uniform. “If you took them out you had to negotiate those corduroy breeches.”

In an interview, another ex-Great Ayton Land Army girl said:

“There was a farmer’s son there and they used to have me in for dinner. A proper dinner; I hadn’t to eat my sandwiches. And when I went home on leave he would give me eggs and stuff like that. It transpired that they were trying to get me off with him you see! Anyway, it got a bit too bad. I didn’t want him. So not long after that I started going out with Laurie, a local boy. Well, things changed completely, they were furious. So I asked for a move.”

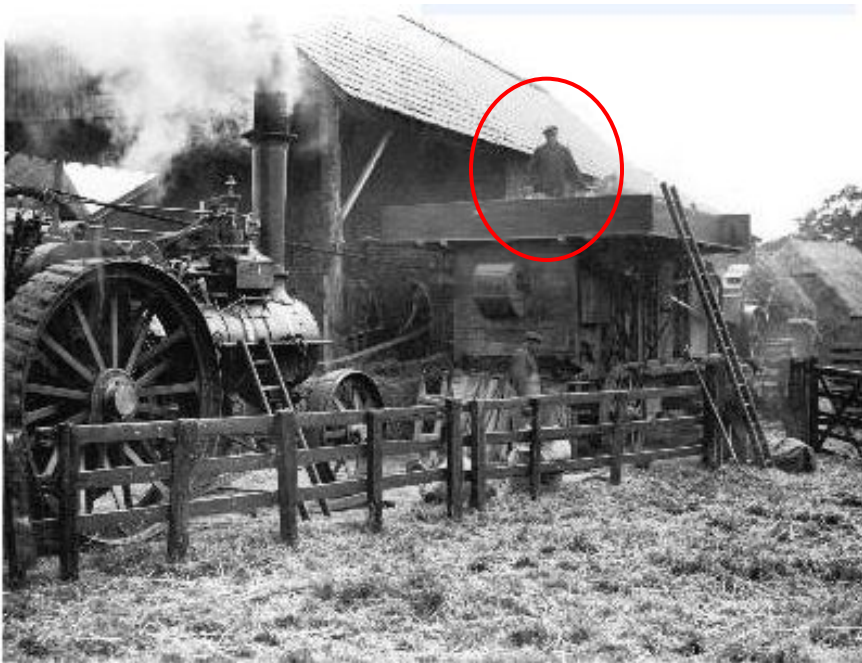


Advances were not always from local men. One Ayton Land Army girl was given the portrait on the left by an Italian prisoner-of-war. It was painted on margarine wrappers, paper being difficult to obtain. Presented to her at home, her mother had answered the door and called ‘Ivy, there’s an Eyetie to see you.’ Italian prisoners were housed at Undercliffe Hall and worked on farms, often alongside Land Army girls. With their acknowledged ‘charisma’ they were popular with the women of the village.

Apart from the arduous work, Land Army girls had to get used to a life away from home comforts, as shown by more extracts from interviews with ex-Great Ayton Land Army girls:

“One of the things I didn’t like was the earth closets. I think there were a lot about at that time. I think a lot up North had these earth closets. Where I belonged we had water closets. Even my grandparents had them.”

Speaking of life in the Stokesley hostel “And if you didn’t get up first, if you didn’t get up as soon as the light went on in the dormitory, you had to put your own sandwiches up and all that would be left was plain bread, no butter, and beetroot. Can you imagine, by lunch time the sandwiches wanted a spoon. The bread was all red, it was awful.”

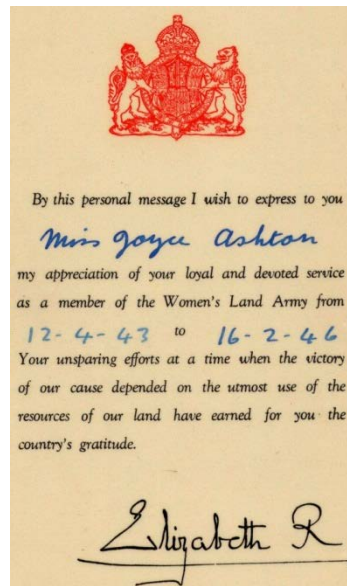
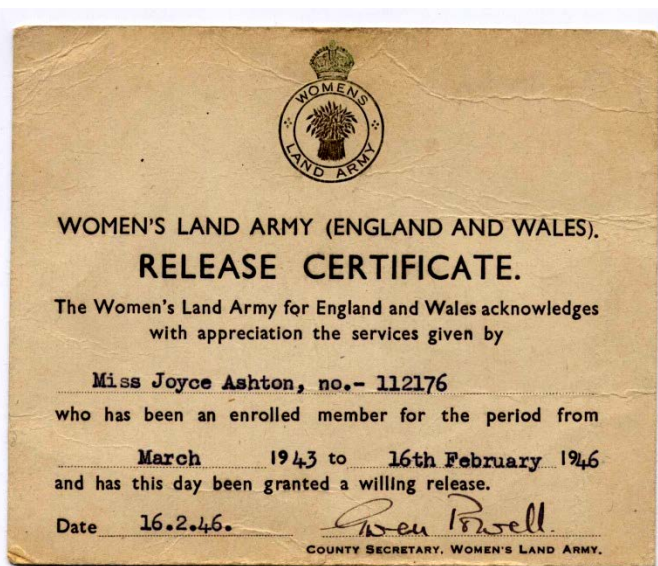


Extra help on farms was always needed at threshing time. One ex-Stokesley Land Army girl remembered:

“We enjoyed this threshing although it was dirty and all that. We got one and six a day extra and that was great for us. And we got our meals; you got a hot dinner when you went threshing, when you went to the farms you just got sandwiches.

The girls were often given the job of cutting bands (the ties around the bundles of corn). This was hard work and being up by the chimney of the traction engine driving the thresher, was hot and dirty work. There were other perils, as related by a farm worker in Great Ayton:

“I was once on a farm where there were two Land Army girls cutting bands and when I looked up there was a hole in her dungarees and a mouse looking out! I daren’t tell her because I thought she might scream and jump into the thresher so I didn’t say anything.”



WLA girls were badly treated on their release. They received nothing apart from the two certificates shown left. There was no gratuity, no civilian clothes, and they couldn't even keep their uniform. The National Director of the WLD resigned in 1945 in protest over the issue.

The WLA was finally disbanded in 1952. There was no official recognition for those serving in the WLA until 2008, when surviving members could apply for a special badge (right). Some of the badges were presented at Downing Street and at regional events around the country. At least one of the surviving Great Ayton WLA girls did not apply for their badge, feeling it was too little, too late.





This presentation was prepared by Ian Pearce, based on detailed interviews with most of the 17 or so WLA girls who worked on farms in and around Great Ayton, and with local farmers and farm workers.

Other references include:

WLA archives at the Yorkshire Museum of Framing, Murton Park, York.

The Women's Land Army by Vita Sackville West
Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1944.