



What was the Women's Land Army?

The Women's Land Army (WLA) made a significant contribution to boosting Britain's food production during the .

Before the Second World War, Britain had imported much of its food. When war broke out, it was necessary to grow more food at home and increase the amount of land in cultivation. With many male agricultural workers joining the armed forces, women were needed to provide a new rural workforce.

The WLA had originally been but disbanded at the end of the . It reformed in June 1939. Women were initially asked to volunteer to serve in the Land Army and, from December 1941, could also be into land work. At its peak in 1944, there were more than 80,000 women – often known as 'land girls' – in the WLA.

Land girls did a wide variety of jobs on the land. They worked in all weathers and conditions and could be directed to work anywhere in the country.

Here are 10 surprising facts about the work of the WLA during the Second World War.

POSTERS

1. It recruited women from towns and cities



By autumn 1941, more than 20,000 women had volunteered to serve in the Women's Land Army (WLA). One third of these volunteers had lived in London or another large city. Posters, such as this one, suggested that the WLA offered a healthy outdoor lifestyle, which perhaps appealed to many urban women and girls.

ART

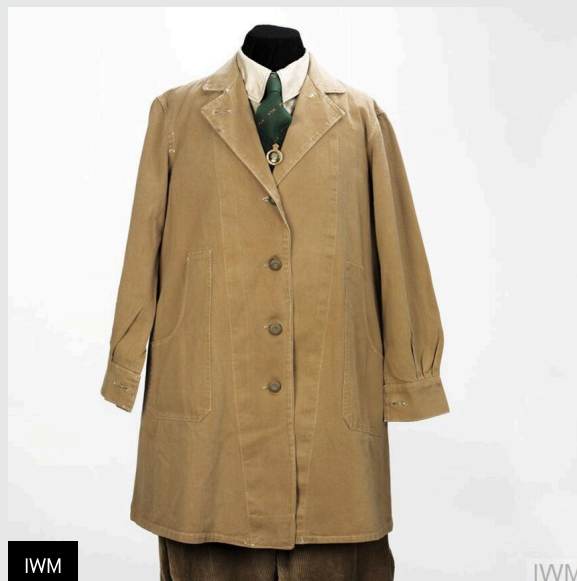
2. Many land girls lived in hostels



Many land girls lived in at the farms where they worked. However, in many rural areas, living conditions could be very basic and the lifestyle lonely. As larger numbers of women were recruited, hostels were set up to house land girls. By 1944, there were 22,000 land girls living in 700 hostels.

UNIFORMS AND INSIGNIA

3. There were strict rules about how to wear the WLA uniform



coat Light brown 3/4 length single-breasted open-collared overall coat made of drill material. Fitted to each hip are deep flapless pockets and a cloth belt is attached to the rear of the garment. Fitted to the front are four olive-coloured plastic detachable buttons, secured to the coat by removable shanks, as are the single buttons attached to the cuffs.

ART

4. A quarter of all land girls did dairy work



By 1944, when the Women's Land Army was at its peak, around one quarter of all land girls were employed in some form of dairy work. This painting depicts a scene at Sparsholt Farm Institute near Winchester. This was a former agricultural college which had been converted into a training establishment for members of the Women's Land Army.

PHOTOGRAPHS

5. Land Girls were employed as rat catchers



Pests such as rats posed a serious threat to supplies of food and animal fodder on British farms. During wartime, there were thought to be over 50 million rats in Britain. To help counter this threat, teams of land girls were trained to work in anti-vermin squads. Two land girls are reputed to have killed 12,000 rats in just one year. Land girls in anti-vermin squads also were also trained to kill foxes, rabbits and moles.

PHOTOGRAPHS

6. Land Girls were paid less than men for the same work



Land girls were paid directly by the farmers who employed them. The minimum wage was 28s per week and from this, 14s was deducted for board and lodging. The average wage for male agricultural workers was 38s per week. The basic working week for land girls was 48 hours in winter and 50 in summer. Initially there were no holidays – paid or unpaid, just a free travel pass after six months. However, conditions improved after 1943 with the introduction of the 'Land Girls Charter'. This introduced one week's holiday per year and raised the minimum wage.

PHOTOGRAPHS

7. Land Girls were employed by Kew Gardens



While the majority of land girls were employed on general farm work, many were also given the opportunity to carry out more specialist horticultural tasks. Until 1943, some were employed in private country houses to help maintain extensive kitchen gardens. The famous botanic gardens at in Surrey also employed land girls. The camomile being harvested in this photograph was planted at the request of the Ministry of Home Security for use as a quick-growing, wiry camouflage for new airfields.

ART

8. Land Girls worked on land reclamation



As part of the drive to produce extra food, the Government needed more land to be turned over for food production. Efforts were made to transform areas of land previously unsuitable for farming. One of the most significant projects was in East Anglia where thousands of acres of fenland were drained. Heavy machinery such as excavators and tractors, often operated by land girls, were needed to carry out this work.

PHOTOGRAPHS

9. The WLA had a specialist forestry branch called the Timber Corps



The Women's Timber Corps was set up in 1942 to help source and prepare wood which was needed urgently for pit props and telegraph poles. The work carried out by women in the Timber Corps, known as 'Lumber Jills', included selecting and measuring trees suitable for felling, sawing and lifting timber and burning brushwood. Around 6,000 women worked in the Timber Corps.

ART

10. Land Girls sometimes worked alongside POWs



Land girls were not the only additional work force available to farmers. By 1943, there were almost 40,000 Italian prisoners of war working on British farms. In some places they worked alongside land girls. The general public was also encouraged to help out with farm work, especially at harvest time. This was seen as a cheap way of taking a holiday in the countryside. Special camps were set up to accommodate volunteers.

Related content



WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

Women were conscripted in December 1941. They were given a choice of working in industry or joining one of the auxiliary services – the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) or the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS).



WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES

In Britain during the First World War, there was a shortage of farm labour as men were conscripted into the forces, and a need to grow more food due to the threat to supplies caused by German submarines. This led to the establishment of the Women's Land Army in February 1917.



VE DAY

It's an iconic photograph - one that has been used across the world to highlight the celebrations on VE Day, the end of the Second World War in Europe. But there's always been one big question surrounding this particular image: what was the story behind those two women smiling for the camera in the Trafalgar Square fountains on 8 May 1945.

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