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Your Country Needs You!

Reminiscences of women on the land during the First World War.

Both animals and plants are largely dependent on the weather, and as this cannot be forecasted with any certainty it is impossible to keep to any rigid programme of operations. The work of the day must be settled on the day itself and on the spot; everything later can be provisional only and subject to the condition: weather permitting. This habit of making daily decisions engenders a spirit of independence of mind and judgment often mistaken by superficial observers for obstinacy.

Sir John Russell, English Farming, 1942

At the outbreak of the First World War, I was living in the Wye Valley, nearly seventeen and rather idle. But, my father being abroad, I was the daughter to stay at home. This happy, but perhaps useless, existence came to an end one August evening, with a telegram delivered by a village boy. I, and everyone else, awoke. The call for women was, I think, not immediate, except for the nursing profession; but gradually pressure built up, and, even in the then very remote countryside, one felt the urge to help. I was what was known as an 'outdoor' girl, and the Land Army attracted me; but I thought I should be more useful if I had some real knowledge and training.

Reading University was offering courses of three to four months to prepare girls for land work, and it was arranged that I should do this. We lived in St. Andrew's Hall, which was the only Women's Residential Hall then, and my memories are very pleasant. We learned dairy work, butter and cheesemaking, milking cows (by hand), and received lectures on the welfare and care of stock. I can't remember much about poultry, but it is a very long time ago, although I do remember many pleasant weekends on the river!

However, at the end of this period, we did not join the Land Army but an organisation called The Women's Farm and Garden Union. Through this we were offered work. I think now the old bugbear of class distinction must have been at work, but I was far too naïve to realise anything of this, and I went happily down to Sussex to the estate of a Liberal MP. His wife was very active in working for Womens Rights, and quite advanced for the times. The bailiff of the estate was a woman - very efficient and capable; and she directed our work, but otherwise left us entirely to live our own lives. There were four of us permanently, and we were allocated three cottages on the estate, fairly modern and pleasant, but with no sanitation, and the loo to each one in the garden. Twice a week we could have a bath up at the House. This sounds incredible now, but it was by no means unusual then, and caused no complaint. I was the dairymaid; there was the carter, who worked in the stables; the chaffeuse (for the one car); and a fourth girl, who worked in the fields at seasonal work, and in the gardens.

I worked under the cowman. There were about ten cows, which I had to fetch in from the fields, and chain up in the cowshed by 7.00 a.m. . . . The milk was set in large round pans on slate slabs which lined the dairy walls, and at night I skimmed off the cream for butter-making, and for use in the house. I do not think I ever had a separator then, but they were beginning to be used. Having done the immediate dairy work, I went back to the cowsheds, to help the cowman clean down the sheds, to cut hay from the rick, and put it ready in the racks for the night feed, and to feed any young calves that were being weaned. Twice a week I churned cream into butter for the house, and also kept them supplied with soft cheese.

It is difficult to describe the farming of 1914-18. It is so utterly changed that I have no interest in looking round a farmyard now. Our farmyard was square, with the cowsheds one side and the stables facing us; the centre was a dung heap (not as unpleasant as some silage now). The dung was removed to the fields and spread, and sometimes that job was done by us, though usually by the men. It was extremely heavy work, as anyone knows who has moved a fork-full of dung from one place to another! Two of us - standing on the dung heap - loaded the cart, and another led the horse away to the field. There the dung was unloaded in reasonable heaps, in lines across the field, to be spread later.

I cannot describe as I should like, the farm men we worked with. Very real countrymen, slow and gentle. I never remember bad language, though admit to not always following the Sussex dialect. I hope they respected us, as we respected them. I shall always remember Dixon, the carter, calling me across to the stables one dark morning to have a cup of tea in the harness room with him and his mate. That the tea tasted of paraffin and horses meant less than nothing. I had been accepted into a Holy of holies, and I was then allowed to help harness Blossom, as he lowered his lovely head to thrust through the collar I help up to him. I am an old woman now, but I find it is these things I remember.

We had, should I say, no amusements; and there was the almost constant sound of [the] guns from France. Every so often a face would be gone from the table, and

a whisper go around of bad news from France. Sometimes this face would appear again, and work continue as usual. Yet we were happy, and I look back upon it as a time of great friendships and growth that I would not have missed. The sad and bitter thing is that we thought we were helping to win the last ever war. The war to end all wars.

Betty Farquhar, Inkberrow, Worcestershire.

I was still at school when the war started. Although not of farming stock (my father being a doctor) I had been brought up surrounded by animals of all descriptions - horses, dogs, rabbits, and such. I knew early on that I wanted to farm, and persuaded my parents to allow me to apply for a course in agriculture. In those days there was no free access to such institutions for women, and those colleges that existed had only men students. But I had heard that there was to be a women's agricultural college founded - Cheltenham, I think - and I wanted to be part of it. Being an only child, and I suppose rather spoilt, my father agreed.

Two friends were equally keen and, in 1915, we heard that a Mrs Watson Kennedy was taking girls on to her farm. The training would be six weeks, and we thought: what can anyone learn in six weeks? We had to pay for the training, but the three of us set off in my Ford Flivver. We did the six weeks, and then both my friends left. Mrs Kennedy said I could stay and work on the farm. Luckily the cowman was nice, and would teach me anything I wanted to learn. Women had only worked at certain jobs on farms in those days, like field work, and not many worked with animals or in dairies. Living in rural Norfolk, as I did, I was not associated with any womens' movement, and I lived a very isolated life. If there were newspapers, I never saw them. I just wanted to get on to the land. I think a new branch of the WI was being started in the village, but I never went to a meeting as it was several miles from home, and once work started I had no time. There was no *Landswoman* magazine where I was, and no official war-work organisation.

Mrs Kennedy had the first Jersey attested herd in England, and I desperately wanted to work with the cows. Everyone had said the Norfolk marshes were too harsh for Jerseys, but they were not. One girl was already working in the dairy. We got up at 5.00 a.m., and rarely had any time off at all. I had my keep, and five shillings a week, and I loved it! There was a man who drove the milk cart, but when he left I was asked whether I would take it on. I still kept on four of the cows, and added my milk round at Blakeney. Half a pint of Jersey milk then sold for a penny three farthings! I walked the round, and was home for breakfast before 9.00 a.m., then fed the pony. After lunch, there was the second milking to do, and numerous other work. Cows always seem to like calving at night, and I used to sit up sometimes - first with the cowman, and then alone. The very first time I did this, it was twins. The cowman was horrified, the next morning, that I had not sent for him.

I got married before the end of the war - my husband a boy of nineteen in the trenches, never having held a rifle in his hand; not even to shoot a rabbit. I moved



Dorothea Cross.

to a farm in Northrepps where I was able to get leave at twenty-four hours notice, in case I needed it. There I did the milk round into Cromer, with a funny little pony named Snowball who used to round up the cows. We had Shorthorns there, but they were not so nice after my dear Jerseys.

I heard there about the new WI movement; but I was always too busy, and the village was a long way from the farm. I wore a smock for most of the war, but towards the end we had visits from the official Land Army, who were dressed up in hats and breeches. We had no contact with any unions, and there were no rallies or recruiting drives.

Dorothea M. Cross, Swardeston, Norfolk.

In 1915, some Co-operative Farming people canvassed the Colleges for help with fruit picking . . . Newnham volunteered, and the terms were, that accommodation would be provided but we would have to 'do' for ourselves. We would be paid 15s. a week for normal hours, but go on to 'piece' rates when the fruit was plentiful.

We lived in Jephson Hall - on the Sutton Bridge to Lynn road. The Hall was divided into two main sections, with the back one divided again into two small rooms: one for our Leader, who was a Tutor, and the other into a Wash Room, with eight tin basins on trestle tables, and a jug of boiled water for teeth. Our water came from a small rain well and was used very sparingly, as it had to last the whole summer. There were two long trestle tables, and a small cooking stove, in the other section at the back of the Hall.

The front of the Hall contained our ticking mattresses (which we filled with straw on arrival) on the floor. I remember that by the second night there was not a shoe among the company which did not witness to the mortality of the apparently usual inhabitants, the beetles.

We were a group of fifteen souls, with a rota of thirteen workers and two housekeepers. Baths were a difficulty. The local doctor allowed us two a day in his house, but the boiler burst the next winter, so he could not keep that up. The local pub let us have two a day at a cost of 3d. each, and for those who could get into Lynn under their own steam [there was] the Globe Hotel. I hired a bike for 2s. 6d. a week.

Sir Richard Winfrey was our planner, and he came down to see us installed, and sent the Press later on. We were officially in the Women's National Land Service Corps and wore khaki armlets till we qualified by length of service for green baize ones with a red crown. I still have them both. We had no uniform, and wore gym slips or overalls. The plan joined us with a bunch of regular village women, who treated us at first with distinct caution if not actual disdain. But we wore them down with our tomfoolery, and we sang lots of songs with good choruses. The main one was 'The American Railway' with a chorus of 'Patsiooria' and so we became called by that name.

The farm was some miles away, so bikes were a necessity. Our hours got caught up with the beginning of Daylight Saving. For example, the first year we picked strawberries and got them on the early train to London for lunch. The next year with the hour difference, the berries were not right for picking to do that. But we were still up by 6.30 a.m., to a mug of milk and dry bread - and no washing! We rode to the farm and worked until 8.30 a.m., and rode back for a breakfast of porridge, bread and honey. Back at 9.30 a.m. until 12 noon, when the housekeeper came with bread and cheese (no butter), and we got tea from the farm. If funds were good we maybe had roast potatoes or sausages. We worked again from 12.30 p.m. to 4.00 p.m., and back for a supper of soup, potatoes and rice, and a wash, and bed - officially - around 8.00 p.m. The first week we had to buy the odd pan, etc., and our wages were down to a ½d. each. We all trooped down to the nearest shop, and spent the lot!

The local folk were most kind. The doctor took a great interest in us, and I kept up a good friendship with him and his family, and visited them for as long as I can

remember. Other people invited two or three of us each weekend for a meal, and a look at civilisation again. I remember one lady who was good to us: she had twenty-four rabbits, lots of pigeons, three hives of bees, two greenhouses, and a motor bike!

The Press came down with its cameras; and articles appeared in the local and the Cambridgeshire newspapers. One article was headed 'The Princess in Real Life', and [went on] 'their hoods were bewitchingly rural and only their speech betrayed them, for they came from Newnham.' Photographs were many. Typical stuff, showing rows of us with hoes over our shoulders; bunched on a hay bale with mugs of tea and buns; crouched over the strawberry rows, and so on. But the main one was of all of us sitting cross-legged down the farm track with our hands clasped behind our heads. This was reproduced on the large shop posters in Cambridge in full size with the indignant caption - 'Is this what higher education does for women?' Remember, we lived in a time when no woman wore trousers!

Hilda Rountree, Uppermill, Oldham.

I was staying with friends in Netley, Hampshire, when I decided to join the force of women volunteering to work on the land. I had already learned to hand milk (extremely slowly), but that was about all. I knew that I loved animals and the countryside, and wanted so much to do something useful. Men were volunteering for war service, and I could think of nothing more suitable than helping to keep the country fed.

I knew little or nothing about the womens' movements going on in the towns. We country women thought the suffragettes scatter-brained individuals. The WI movement had started to establish itself, but although I did join later, I had little time, from 1916 until the war ended, to bother with such things. Institutes were founded and flourished in the early war years, though it was unfortunate that many women who would have been its staunchest members found it impossible, either from pressure of work or sheer isolation, to support its establishment. I did join the Women's Farm and Garden Union in 1916. My certificate of enrolment for land work is dated May 1916, and was signed both by Mr Walter Runciman, President of the Board of Trade, and Lord Selborne, then President of the Board of Agriculture. It is very grand and patriotic, as I suppose it all was then.

My first job lasted the best part of a year. I worked for Mr Thomas Fry of Westover Farm, Ringwood in Hampshire. I remember my Boss told me that when I could comfortably hand milk eight cows I could think I was taking the place of one man. There was a lot to prove in that first month, but I did learn to milk many more than eight cows at a sitting. I remember a joke that was played on me when I was new, and I suppose on lots of other girls. There was one cow who was separated from the rest as she had recently calved. I used to take the calf out at intervals and milk the mother. One morning I went as usual to the box, and thought nothing of the tittering going on in the cowshed. When I opened the door, there, instead of the cow, was the bull. By that time I was aware of the difference, and made myself scarce!

In those early days we were not issued with a uniform, although I think some were later. It was still customary for women to wear long skirts, whether doing farm work or not. I rigged myself up with a shorter than usual skirt, a shirt, and an old black slouch hat. We often had to collect animals from the station, perhaps bullocks that the farmer had bought, and quite often there was some chasing to be done on the way home. The station was about two miles from the farm, and the animals were often bewildered and nervy after their journey. One particular day there was more running about than usual. In Chapel that Sunday, horrified tales were circulating about a woman running around the town in a short skirt - 'so short yer could see her *britches*!' I had to admit that the woman was myself, and explained, I think in vain, about the need for more suitable work clothes. We were later issued with some official uniform, and, later still, with breeches. The skirts were so impractical it was little wonder that men thought women would not be able to cope. I don't suppose they would have coped, if *they* had been made to wear skirts down to their heels!

I did not regard the work as a job, more a way of life; which was just as well, since we got very little time off. When I finished in the cowshed there was field work, and in the winter the threshing party would come round and turn the farm upside down for a few weeks. I do not think many of the men were at odds with me because I was female, but there was one horseman who resented my being allowed to drive the pony and buggy into town, and refused point-blank to harness up for me. So I did it myself, and, so long as the boss approved, he never put his objections into words - just silently made clear his disapproval of such goings-on.

Later on in the war, one of the county organisers persuaded me to start teaching farming skills. I arrived at one farm where there was already a local woman helping to milk. I remember the filth, and the nonchalance with which she worked. She wore a man's cap turned round the wrong way so that she could lean comfortably into the cow's side when milking, and a long skirt which trailed in the mud and muck. The cowshed was disgusting, and hygiene unheard of. Nobody thought very much about the 'whys' and 'wherefores' of keeping dairies clean. I determined then that I would do my bit to bring about a change on that farm at least, and blessed Mr Fry for his good training and common sense at Ringwood.

One training technique we had for milking was an 'automatic cow'. It consisted of a canvas bag on four legs, complete with four rubber teats. The bag was filled with water, and the teats adjusted by screws to allow hard or easy milking. I suspect it was as valuable in terms of merriment as it was in practical instruction.

We had very little social life in those days. There was a small community hall in the village, and visiting players used to come and put on a variety of theatrical performances. There were whist-drives too, but I could seldom get away, especially in winter. I remember one farm where the milk from the herd used to go to the station. We had a cart pulled by mules, which could be very stubborn. The milk had to be at the station by 7.30 a.m., loaded up in seventeen-gallon churns. They were too heavy to lift, so we had to roll them and watch out for the tops. I often had to seek a helping hand from someone because of the ice. The mules had to be led from the

farm, and we all slipped and slid our way uneasily to and from the station. And this was after getting up, long before dawn, staggering through the dark and cold, milking, and loading the churns before seven in the morning!

Beatrice Oaks, Diss, Norfolk

[After the War, Miss Oaks obtained a training scholarship, and went on to become an Instructress at Swanley College. She was a lifelong member of the Women's Farm and Garden Association, and trained many Land Girls for work on farms during the Second World War.]

I joined the Land Army in 1918, and stayed in it for some years. I joined, soon after leaving school, against my parents wishes, because I had always wanted to live in the country (I was a Londoner), and loved animals.

My experiences were very mixed: some good, some bad. I was stationed first in Buckinghamshire, and afterwards in Surrey. Mostly my work [consisted of] dairy work, milking, looking after calves, and some field work.

At Dorney, in Buckinghamshire, I shared a cottage with three girls, and we did all the milking - ten cows each - twice a day. We had to look after ourselves, and, of course, get up very early. This was my happiest time. Also in Buckinghamshire, two other girls and myself shared a cottage on a Duke's estate, which was terrible: only the bare necessities of life, and about ten yards from some abandoned pigsties which housed a few hundred rats! Before we could have even a cup of tea we had to collect wood to light a fire.

Apart from milking, I had to take the milk and a float to Gerrards Cross every day. While in Reigate, I did a milk round.

Dora Brazil, Seaton, Devon.

Wishing to help the war effort, I took a three-month gardening course in Gloucestershire, in 1918. Garden produce was sold locally. The student in charge of the horse and cart had a real performance to harness the animal and had to stand in the manger; once in the cart the horse was reasonably manageable. The winter months [during which] I was at the College were cold, and the ground frozen deep. We used to hack potatoes the size of marbles, and measly parsnips, out of the ground. So bad was the food problem . . . [that] customers were glad even of those. After the course, I did not join the Land Army but was directed to Leicestershire, to the Hunting Box of the 'Coats Cotton' family. For a time I lodged with the wife of the butler, who was at the war. The gardening staff included two elderly men, too old for active service; a girl from the village pub, and a Scottish lass, all under the charge of the Head Gardener. Unfortunately, I had very bad colds, and at these times I was sent to the Rectory, in the village, where I received great kindness always; but such was the food problem that when, at supper, we were literally offered 'porridge mould', it was accepted gratefully!

It was my job to look after the boiler fires at night. These heated five or six greenhouses. I used to visit them at 11.00 p.m., as the fires were very temperamental, and there was trouble if the houses cooled off. The walk to the gardens [took] a lonely fifteen minutes, but one had no fear of walking alone in those days. After a time Mrs Coats arranged that the Scots gardener and myself should live in the bothy, which, with grooms and gardeners away, was vacant. A dear old soul walked from a neighbouring village to cook our breakfast and midday meal. Rations were so inadequate that we were very dependent on the vegetable produce and milk allowed us, with an occasional old hen given to us by our employer.

In the winter months, I seemed to spend my time wheeling barrows of manure for the two men, until Mrs Coats saw me at this work and said she wanted to try to wheel the barrow. To her mind the work was too heavy for a girl! There was always plenty of work to be done in the greenhouse, as Mrs Coats liked plenty of flowers for the house. The Head Gardener, and Sandy, the Scottish lass, spent hours each morning with flower decoration. In the summer, I mowed from 6.30 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. with a mowing machine, small for such a large area of lawn. I had a Shetland pony with overgrown hoofs, and the other girl gardener pushed the machine.

I recall the heavy work, planting and harvesting potatoes in a field away from the main garden. The wife of the remaining groom used to bring out a tray of tea and scones to refresh us - and how thankful we all were for this respite. One particular day we were told to rake the front drive for guests, and we watched their arrival through the bushes. I recall two or three children; one fair boy of about six, who is now the present Duke of Wellington. My Scottish friend Sandy and I remained friends, with letters and visits to each others homes, from 1918 to 1977, when she died. I need no pat on the back for the fact that, at knocking-off time, [at 5.30 p.m.], if a piece of work I had set out to do was not finished I always stayed on to complete the job . . . My wage was 18s. per week, and I believe my lodgings were paid for. It was not until I left, that my employer told me that she ought to have negotiated for her girl gardeners instead of leaving arrangements to the Head Gardener. I had a taste of the 'servants hall': they did not want us to eat with them - the cook, lady's maid, head housemaid, and parlour maid - and definitely let the housekeeper know this. We had our own rooms and helped with cooking in the bothy. After a time in Leicestershire, I felt that my time was not being spent on work of necessity, so I sought other fields - in the YMCA on Salisbury Plain.

Edith Hedworth, Atworth, Melksham, Wiltshire.

I worked on the land as a member of the Women's Land Service Corps, which was started and organised by the Women's Farm and Garden Union. I trained for about six weeks at a large Estate belonging to Lady Fitzgerald of Buckend House, near Faringdon, in Berkshire. She was rather an alarming lady, and used to ask us to tea with her at the Mansion, two at a time, on Sundays. Food at that time was not too plentiful, so an elegant afternoon tea was appreciated as an extra.



Enrolment of Land Army girls, c. 1915-16.
A photograph taken at Mr J. Thisleton-Smith's farm at West Barsham, Norfolk.
Miss Burton-Fanning presents an armband to a cook/dairymaid.

We were taught, by going with her usual farm staff, to handle the horses, plough, harrow, and to milk by hand a herd of small black Kerry cows with tiny udders and teats. About eight of us, aged seventeen to twenty-four, lived in a sparsely furnished house in Buckland village run by a very pretty Scotswoman. At the end of our course, she helped arrange the jobs for us to go to. Mine was as junior carter at Mr Stratford's Bosmore Farm, at Fawley, near Henley-on-Thames, where I worked from the spring of 1918 to the summer of 1919.

I lived with two other girls in a tied cottage, [and] an old woman nearby cooked our supper. We had to walk up a hill - about half a mile, to reach the stables, and get there by 6.30 a.m. We fed the horses in their stalls, then had a snack breakfast, heating cocoa on a tiny stove. We groomed and harnessed up, and were at work in the fields by 8.00 a.m. Around 10.30 a.m. we had a break for 'Nuncheon'. We carried our food, tied up in red cotton handkerchiefs, in a woven straw hod that hung easily on the harness. Back to the stables by 3.00 p.m. we fed, watered, and groomed the horses, mucked out the stalls, racked up with hay for the night, and knocked-off work at 5.00 p.m. No half-day on Saturdays, and a starting wage of 18s. a week, paid and signed for every Friday afternoon. Free lodgings; wood, coal, and oil for the lamps.

There were four teams of plough horses. The head carter was a nice man. He lived close to the farm with his wife and three little daughters. A good teacher, he took a real interest in our progress.

The farmer rode a pony called Peacock, and would arrive suddenly in the field to see how the work was progressing. On one occasion he remarked, 'Now then, you great strong men, don't stand there all day with your hands in your pockets up to your elbows!'. As a retort, when he one day offered to help with a heavy loading job, the head carter said under his breath, 'Yes, you push and I'll grunt!' Mr Stratford sometimes lent us his trap, a governess-cart, for a Sunday afternoon drive. Besides Peacock, there were two skewbald ponies - Lily and Daisy. Abbott, the foreman, sometimes rode them. He looked after the cow and the poultry.

During my time at Bosmore I learned to plough a straight furrow. I had various teams - Tiny and Blossom, Violet and Diamond. These last two were cast Army horses - not true cart horses like those of the head carter, Sergeant and Boy. They were most intelligent; as was Count, a huge obstinate Liver Chestnut.

The farm was on flinty chalk, with not much level ground, and about 300 acres.

We had a house cow, but no dairy herd, and no pigs. There were sheep, managed by Shepherd Barnett and the odd-man Derrick. They used to spend a lot of time penning the sheep on the root fields. 'One pushes totherun, totherun pushes back, and down go the hurdles, look see', Derrick used to say. The sheep were sheared at the farm by two itinerant shearers, and we loaded a big waggon with the wool, which then went to Wallingford; for that, our horses always had on the best harness, with shining brasses and bells on their headpieces.

At haymaking, Alice - the maid of all work - in a long dress of blue cotton, with a white apron, used to help by leading the horses on the waggon as it started off to

the next row of haycocks. She called 'stand firm, pull up', to the carter on top of the load and to the horses. One of the girls had rather well-cut breeches (mine were old Army ones of my brothers), and Mr Stratford said to her: 'I wish you'd give the name of your tailor to the others'. It was a pleasant break to take a horse to be shod at Fawley village, up another hill. The blacksmith's wife always asked us into her house for a cup of tea while the job was being done.

We never penetrated into the farmhouse. I think Mrs Stratford was 'delicate', and a recluse. The work was physically hard, but we got used to it. When very tired, in bad weather, I sometimes wished that my war work was in an office or under cover! But I enjoyed it. The early walk up the hill, with glorious sunrises, the outdoor life of field and hedge; the comradeship; the satisfaction of doing a good job, with the co-operation of one's horses; the fun of our own cottage. Baths took place weekly in a brick-floored lean-to scullery. To heat up the water we used to light a fire, usually of gorse twigs, under the old-fashioned copper, and then bale the hot water into a metal bath, and finally tip the bath in the right direction so that the contents flowed out through a gap in the wall. Our drinking water we drew from a well, and the 'loo' was an earth closet, in a shed in the garden!

This experience, though it lasted only two years, gave me a lifelong interest in farming. I can remember now the fertilizer we used on the farm: it was Basic Slag - a grey powder with a fearful smell - which we fetched in sacks from Henley!

Anne Farewell-Jones, Sidmouth, Devon.