IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue is the final part of "AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF BEDFORDSHIRE WOMEN'S LAND ARMY IN THE 1940s" by Stuart Antrobus, based on recent research of local and national archives and interviews conducted by the author with former Land Girls who served in the County as well as additional oral history interviews conducted by Carmela Semeraro.

If you have some research work that you would like to share with others please contact the editor, details on the back page. Don’t let it lie gathering dust at the back of a drawer after all that effort.

COMING EVENTS


Local services, such as highway maintenance, social welfare and law and order, were the responsibility of individual parishes until the late 19th century. During the workshop we will examine the rich array of documents produced by these activities from the 16th century, both on screen and in the form of photocopies. They include Churchwardens Accounts, Vestry Minutes (recording the decisions of residents in regulating the affairs of the parish) and account books kept by the Surveyors of Highways, Constables and Overseers of the Poor. Contributors will include Chris Pickford (the former County Archivist), James Collett-White (BLARS) and Stephen Coleman (HEIO BCC).

The charge of £10 per person includes tea or coffee and a ploughman’s lunch. The Workshop starts with coffee at 9.45 am, and the Introduction will begin at 10.05 am. Lunch will be at 12.45 and tea will be served during the afternoon session, which should finish by 4.15 pm. The Registration Form, available from Elizabeth Field Tel. 01525 633029, must be returned by Friday 29th October but places are limited and may fill up before then. Bookings will only be accepted if they are accompanied by payment. If you require acknowledgement of your registration please enclose sae.

BLHA Spring Exhibition: pre-1918 postcards, Saturday 9th April 2005 at Parkside Hall, Ampthill

A number of Societies and other bodies have expressed interest in taking part therefore a hall has been booked. The exhibition will be limited to postcards of Bedfordshire with the aim of displaying the local history of our County in the widest sense.

Some members have been asked about display methods for postcards. One suggestion is that postcards may be attached to larger sheets of plain card without damage by using photograph corners. The plain card can be attached with Velcro to vertical display boards, which we will hire as at our other exhibitions. Interesting messages on cards can be photocopied (preferably enlarged) for display, post marks are also important as they can indicate the age of the photo, as is the publisher and any reference number, so include the whole of the reverse in the copy. A guidance note is being produced for distribution to exhibitors.

AGM & BLHA Conference 18th June 2005, Harlington

Next year’s Conference will be hosted by Harlington Heritage Trust members. Information will be sent to all Members by Geoff Hoddinott (01525 754773). More detailed information in next issue of History in Bedfordshire.
The arrival of American servicemen was probably the most exciting thing that happened to English girls during the war. Many Land Girls, particularly in the north of Bedfordshire, near the American airfields, dated them, some got engaged to them and a few married them and became GI brides after the war.

Farming proficiency tests were introduced in the autumn of 1943 to enable Land Girls to prove their skills and later, after the war, encourage them to consider staying on in agriculture after the national emergency was over. The first Milking and Dairy Proficiency Test was held at Luton Hoo Estate, which had played an important part in the early training of volunteers in both milking and dairy, and in horticulture and fieldwork. The judges, local farmers, were impressed not only by the proficiency shown by candidates but also by their technical knowledge in conversation.

Miss Ethel Eaton, a Luton volunteer and Bedfordshire’s star tractor driver, not only gained 92% in her tractor-driving proficiency test but carried away many prizes in ploughing competitions, both in Bedfordshire and in surrounding counties. She led a team of Land Army tractor drivers who defeated a team of men at Woburn Park in 1943.

Liz Day got 100% for Market garden and Fieldwork, 93% for General Farmwork and 96% for Outdoor Garden and Glasshouse Work. Her outstanding 10 years of service to the Bedfordshire Women’s Land Army brought her, and another young woman, Georgina Day, the award of a British Empire Medal.

It was almost inevitable that the hard and sometimes dangerous work these inexperienced young women were asked to take on would result, from time to time, in injury and illness. One young woman from Bolnhurst Hostel, lifted a very heavy bag of corn, got a twisted gut for her trouble and was sent to Kensworth Convalescent Home, a large country house where she got better food and was able to go home to Luton at the weekend. Others were able to convalesce by the sea at the Women’s Land Army Rest Home in Torquay. One land girl from Milton Ernest Hostel was sent by her doctor, diagnosed with over-work and stress. She had a marvellous two weeks there, which coincided with the Olympic sailing races in the summer of 1948.

Occasionally Land Girls were seen formally in public at parades such as Farm Sundays at Russell Park, Bedford and Wardown Park, Luton, and the yearly church services for the dedication of the crops and the blessing of the fruit. They also took part in fundraising activities such as the Wings for Victory parade in June 1943.

Socially, among themselves, there were occasional gymkhana, garden parties, sports days, fetes and May festivities, enabling both private farm and hostel Land Girls to meet up and enjoy each other’s company. The first Land Army Clubs were opened in early 1942.

Royal visits provided an opportunity for having their contribution to the war effort recognised. HRH The Duchess of Gloucester paid a visit to Cople House Hostel on her way to Bedford in March 1944. She was welcomed by over 200 Land Girls.

The highlight in terms of public recognition for the Bedfordshire Women’s Land Army was the Victory Parade of 14 February 1946, when the nineteen-year old Princess Elizabeth came to Bedford to take the salute at a march past of the county’s Land Girls and their agricultural equipment. Over 400 Land Girls took part in the parade and thousands of onlookers lined the streets. At the Corn Exchange she opened an exhibition of handicrafts and distributed long-service armlets. Cople Hostel Choir sang a number of songs.

The Royal visit was just part of a three-day series of events. Each day, at the Corn Exchange, you could view Ministry of Information films in the basement, see the handicraft exhibition and a display of old agricultural implements in the balcony. Louis de Jong and his orchestra played music while
morning coffee was served. Outside in St. Paul’s Square there was a fun fair for the children.

On Friday 15 February there was a Grand Concert by land girls from hostels all over the country, as well as guest artistes, introduced by Trevor Howard, the film star. On the Saturday evening, 16 February, there was a Dance, with music provided by the ‘101’ Military Convalescent Depot Dance Band, from Clapham.

Post-war, despite further recruitment drives, the Land Army in Bedfordshire, as elsewhere in the country, declined in numbers. There were still 800 volunteers working in Bedfordshire at the time of the 1946 Victory parade but by January 1947 the numbers were down to 663. When the Bedford Headquarters office closed in November 1949 (with responsibilities transferred to the Buckinghamshire HQ) there were just 300 members and these steadily decreased until the Land Army nationally was disbanded in early November 1950.

The final WLA parade in London was an inspection of representative Land Girls from all over the country at Buckingham Palace by Queen Elizabeth on 21 October 1950. The girls were issued with green berets to replace those famous “pork pie” hats, which had long ceased to appear “uniform” in shape and the way they were worn.

Every Land Girl was meant to have received a personal “thank you” letter from the Queen, but many girls did not.

There will no doubt have been some former Land Girls who did not enjoy their experience and they are the ones least likely to respond to requests for information by researchers such as myself but the overwhelming response in the interviews I have conducted have been to the effect that these were “the best years of my life” and “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world”.

Miss R. Perritt, a Bedfordshire Land Girl, summed up their contribution in the following two verses from her poem, “The Women’s Land Army”:

An Army came, but not to kill
Only hungry mouths to fill,
An Army clad in brown and green,
About the countryside was seen,
Around the farmyards, on the roads,
With horses, carrying heavy loads,
A women’s army, firm of hand,
Had come to conquer on the Land.

In lonely ones, or gangs together,
In the strange fantastic English weather,
That never a moment may be lost,

In tearing winds and biting frost,
They tended livestock, planted seed,
Tilled, manured, conquered weed,
Picked potatoes, cabbages, beet,
So that England still could eat.

Sources :
• Vita Sackville-West The Women’s Land Army 1944
• W.E. Shewell-Cooper Land Girl: A handbook for the Women’s Land Army 1941 (British Library)
• The National Archives, Kew: Copies of The Land Girl magazine – MAF 59/22
• Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service : X464/25, WW2/AC2/14 - 17
• Stuart Antrous has conducted tape-recorded oral history interviews with the following former Bedfordshire Land Girls (from both private farms and hostels), now deposited with the Sound Archive of the Imperial War Museum, London: Vera Barnett (24653), Joyce Case (24651), Margaret Chessum (24539), Iris Cornwell (24640), Kathleen Cox (24664), Hannah Croft (24644), Elizabeth Day (24643). Doreen “Dawn” Filby (24648), Stella Forster (24642), Rose Hakewill (24650), Ann Haynes (24649), Zeita Holes (24646), Sheila Hope (24647), Joyce Inglis (24645). Betty Nichols (24665), Mary Smith (24652), Mary Spilling (24641), Ethel Wildey (24663).
• Carmela Semeraro has conducted oral history interviews with the following : Betty Fitton, Evelyn Huckvale, Barbara Probate, Betty Schwarz, Zoe Sinfield, Peggy Tedder, Barbara Tovey. The records of which are deposited in the “Changing Landscapes, Changing Lives” archive at the Forest of Marston Vale, Visitors Centre, Millenium Country Park, Stanton Road, Marston Moretaine.
• Stuart Antrous Documents, photographs and completed questionnaires provided by over 70 former Bedfordshire Land Girls to the author.

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Bedfordshire & Luton Archives & Records Service Newsletter for May 2004 contained a fascinating article on the life of Dr. Fowler the founder of the Bedford Record Office and the concept of County Record offices. We now learn that the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society has finally found a home for its valued Fowler Library that will provide it with secure and environmentally appropriate accommodation while permitting wide access to the public under controlled conditions. Unfortunately this will be outside Bedfordshire at University College, Northampton. More details later.

The Bedford Record Office will be closed for the week of 22nd to 26th of November 2004 inclusive for maintenance and cleaning purposes.
Letter from Archive CD Books

I am writing from the Archive CD Books project, which exists to make reproductions of old books, documents and maps available on CD to genealogists and historians and to cooperate with libraries, museums and record offices in providing money to renovate old books in their collection, and to donate books to their collections, where they will be preserved for future generations.

We are a user supported project and not intended to be profit making. Our aim is to do as much conservation work on old books and documents as possible whilst increasing the accessibility of them. We make the documents more accessible by donating some free to Libraries and Museums, as well as making copies available on our website, www.archivecdbooks.org. Where possible we make the CDs fully searchable and indexed.

We would be happy to donate a few CDs to a local library if they are interested and get in contact with us. The libraries can use the CDs as reference material and are welcome to put them on their network; we do not charge a licence fee for this. I would also be happy to donate a few CDs to your society if you have a resource room or library of your own.

Most of all I am writing because I thought we may be able to work together to increase the accessibility of old books and documents in your area. We scan documents held by libraries and museums free of charge; we cover costs through sales of CDs. We donate copies of the scanned book to the library and this enables them to keep the original book under correct archival conditions. Furthermore, the CD can be used in the library so the original information is still widely available. I was wondering if you had contacts with local libraries and museums or knew of individuals who had books in their collection that they needed scanning and preserving? If you do I would be most eager to hear from them so we could discuss the possibility of digitalising their books.

I have only very briefly outlined the work we do here at the Archive CD Books project, further information is available on the above website. I hope that what I have mentioned interests you and your society and hope to hear from you soon. I hope too that the CD demonstrates the type of work we produce.

(note: BLHA holds a list of CDs already produced relating to Bedfordshire, average price £12, and a sample.)

New Publications


John Hatfield Brooks of Fliitwick Manor, Bedfordshire served in the 1st Bengal Light Cavalry and its successor regiments for 20 years, from 1843 and kept a daily diary during most of that period. He gives a vivid picture of the events during the 1857 Mutiny at Mhow where he was a major participant and of the actions the next year of the Sarun Field Force (using the Crew of HMS Pearl) in a successful containing tactic against the Mutineers. The Diary also describes the Kingdom of Oude before and after its annexation by the East India Company. Other features are the substantial changes from the relative slackness of the old pre-Mutiny army to the greater professionalism and responsibilities of the post-Mutiny Army. We also see the Diarist on furlough with his wife's extended family in the Cape, and back at his Manor House in England, adjusting to civilian life.

This is a major document for Indian military history with a Bedfordshire link and has never been published before. Limited edition of 250 copies.

The Shiny Seventh edited by M. G. Deacon, pub. by the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society with The Boydell Press, Hb, illustrated, ISBN 0 85155 069 X, price £25

The story of the 7th Battalion Bedfordshire Regiment from 1915-1918 taken from its official War Diary together with the personal diary of Lieutenant Henry Cartwright, one of the battalion's subalterns. Additional material includes operational orders, casualty lists and suggested battlefield walks.

As a military record the War Diary is fascinating and compelling reading, giving an account of the daily routines of life on the front line - shelling, fatigue and the endless patrols to acquire intelligence on enemy movements or weaknesses - as well as the welcome rest periods away from it. It also includes the major battles in which the regiment saw action: the Somme, Arras, Ypres, and Amiens in 1918. And, as the editor's introduction suggests, Lt. Cartwright's own diary does indeed add a vivid dash of colour and as such is an invaluable record in its own right.