IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue is part one of "AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF BEDFORDSHIRE'S LAND ARMY IN THE 1940s" by, Stuart Antrobus, based on recent research, including interviews with former Land Girls who served in the county, as well as documents in the local and national archives.

Part 2 will follow in the next issue.

Pictured on the right is Mary Pakes, a Bedfordshire Land Girl, she worked as a Forewoman for Bedfordshire ‘War Ag’ and was based at Milton Ernest Hostel, 1942-46.

VISIT TO MOGGERHANGER HOUSE

Members will have received details of the visit to Moggerhanger House on the 24th April 2004. There are still a few places left. If you haven’t had a form and wish to go contact Elizabeth Field on 01525 633029. Act quickly as places are going fast!

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2004 Annual General Meeting will be held at 9.30 am on Saturday 12th June 2004 in the Trinity Methodist Chapel, Shortmead Street, Biggleswade. Registration and coffee will be available from 9 to 9.30 am. Parking will be available in Rose Lane car park. There will be signs directing attendees from the car park to Shortmead street. Please note this Annual General Meeting will be held on the same day and in the same place as the Annual Conference (see below) and members who attend the AGM and do not wish to attend the Conference will not be charged, please notify the registration official on arrival.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE

This year’s conference will be hosted by the Biggleswade History Society and will take place on Saturday 12th June 2004 in the Trinity Methodist Chapel, Biggleswade. The Conference will commence after the completion of the AGM at approximately 10 am. Registration will be from 9 to 9.30 am. Delegate fee £10 (includes lunch and refreshments). The title of the conference is Education and Invention in Biggleswade. Speakers will be Paul Colvin - Place Names; Ken Page - The Ivel Story; Peter Ibbett - On the Road in 1910 and Eric Lund - Education in Biggleswade. There will be guided tours during the day to illustrate the Great Fire of Biggleswade, Dan Albone and the Common. If the weather is not good Local History Videos will be shown.

AUTUMN WORKSHOP 2004

The Autumn Workshop entitled, The Parish Chest, will be held on 6th. of November 2004 and will deal with Church and Parish records, including Churchwardens’ Accounts, Vestry Minutes, Highway Surveyors’ Accounts and Constables’ Accounts. Time and place will be notified in our next issue of the Newsletter. Please make a note of the date in your diary.
AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF BEDFORDSHIRE WOMEN'S LAND ARMY IN THE 1940s—Part 1

Stuart Antrobus

In April 1938, as part of the Government’s preparations for the anticipated war with Germany, the Ministry of Agriculture asked Lady Gertrude Denman to plan the establishment of a Women’s Land Army, as a mobile labour force to release men from agriculture in order to serve in the armed forces. She devised a national structure and chose women chairmen for a series of county committees.

For Bedfordshire, she chose Mrs. Nora Whitchurch as its Chairman and a Miss Farrar as Honorary Organising Secretary. When the Women’s Land Army came into official being in June 1939, the County Committee set about its work. The first stage was to talk to farmers in the County and establish who might need what help in the way of relief labour. The next step was to seek billets in the neighbourhoods of those farms, as soon as the need became known, to accommodate the volunteer Land Girls, who were asked to pledge their service for the duration of the war.

The county headquarters of the organisation was, at first, based at 2, St. Paul’s Square, Bedford, in the ambit of Shire Hall (now the Magistrates’ Court). By August 1941 Mrs. E. Graham had taken over from Mrs. Whitchurch as County Chairman and from November 1941 Mrs. L. Heydemann was County Secretary. The office moved to 43 Harpur Street in June 1942 (where Eagle Court now is). It had the Women’s Land Army “sheaf of corn” sign over the door. Mrs. Heydemann held the post until March 1943 when she resigned due to ill-health. She was succeeded by her Assistant Secretary, Mrs. Ida Eugster, who was in charge until the Bedfordshire Office closed in November 1949.

A handful of volunteers were signed up and found work with private farms in the county. Despite its title and the fact that it was a uniformed service, recruited on a national basis by a government department, the Land Army was a civilian organisation, under the Ministry of Agriculture, and not subject to military discipline. It acted more in the way of an employment agency, finding positions for young women, of minimum age 17½ years, prepared to work, without previous experience, on the land.

“Land Girls,” as they soon came to be known, had to be prepared to sign up to being mobile and working wherever they were needed. County offices of the Land Army set out to match them with farmers who needed extra labour on their farm. Farmers, in return for these inexperienced but enthusiastic young women, agreed to offer them a set contract with guaranteed hours and year-round work, subject to a minimum hourly rate and various other conditions, including one week’s paid leave per year.

The first Land Girls were paid a minimum of 22 shillings (£1.10p) per week (18 shillings (90p), if under 18) for a 48-hour week, plus additional pay for overtime. Deductions were made for the cost of their billet. Actual rates of pay and working hours were decided on a County basis and varied across the country. There were several increases over the course of the years, after hard bargaining with the Ministry of Agriculture and the National Farmers Union by Lady Denman, but pay was always well below that of privates in the armed forces.

Land Girls were employed directly by a farmer (or, later, the Bedfordshire War Agricultural Executive Committee), not by the Ministry of Agriculture or by the Women’s Land Army directly. The only discipline available was dismissal which, at worst, meant direction into the auxiliary services or to the war industry.

This early period of the Women’s Land Army, before conscription for women was brought in, was when Land Girls had first to prove themselves to sceptical farmers and, sometimes, downright hostile male farm workers. At this stage, most of the land girls came from within the county, including the main industrial centres of Bedford, Luton and other towns, and some were able to live at home and travel daily to their farm. Some girls would cycle many miles to work, which was not unusual in those days.

Others were found billets in farm worker’s cottages or elsewhere in a local villages. Conditions varied and everyone had their own particular story of both working and living conditions but accommodation was usually fairly Spartan.

Officially, the organisation had ways of supporting the often-isolated land girls, through volunteer District Representatives, but the reality was often different. Many women who worked on private farms, sometimes as the only land girl there, or one of only a small number in the area, couldn’t remember any contact with the County Office, other than going in, occasionally, to buy extra second-hand clothes to supplement their issued uniform.

If a Land Girl had problems with a farmer or landlady, then they were expected to ring up the County Office and raise the matter—not always an easy matter in the days of few phones and when you felt alone and vulnerable.

That first winter of 1939-40 was the harshest in living memory and these young women, unused to strenuous farm labouring, were given the ultimate test of endurance and fortitude.

The number of volunteers in the first two and a half years was low, in Bedfordshire: the official numbers from the national headquarters were: 24 by 31st December 1939, 53 by December 1940 and 140 by December 1941.

(Cont. On page 3, col. 1)
Conscription for women came in from 18th December 1941, following a government survey showing the desperate shortage of manpower. Unmarried women between 20 and 30 were to be called up into some sort of national service. 19-year olds were brought in early in 1942. They all had to choose between the auxiliary services of the armed forces (army, navy or air force) or war-work in industry, such as munitions factories, or work in agriculture with the Women’s Land Army.

By 31st December 1942, there were 506 Land Girls in Bedfordshire and by July 1943 there were 792. Employment of Land Girls reached its peak in Bedfordshire with 1006 by the end of December 1943. Half of the Land Girls were employed privately by farmers.

A shortage of workers in the aircraft industry caused a temporary ban on Land Army recruiting from August 1943 (when, nationally, the employed strength of the Land Army was 72,403). There was a slight relief on this ban for milkers only, from January 1944. Numbers in Bedfordshire were then reduced slightly by natural wastage, girls leaving to get married or moving on to better-paid war work and only went above 1000 again in the autumn of 1944.

By February 1946, when the great Land Army Victory Parade took place in Bedford, there were 800 Land Girls working in the county but those numbers naturally fell, with the advent of peace, despite recruitment drives. The largest influx of recruits joined in 1942, with conscription and the opening up of hostels around the county for “War Ag” mobile gangs of Land Girls. War Agricultural Committees (“War Ags” for short) were set up in each County by the Ministry of Agriculture to carry out government policy and implement a multitude of directives in the area of food production. Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee set a target on the county’s farmers to plough up to 10,000 acres of land. 17,000 was achieved and this became the minimum thereafter.

The Bedfordshire “War Ag” took in hand about 5000 acres of scrub-covered or otherwise unproductive land in the county. Government-assisted mechanised land drainage, together with powerful crawler tractors, made possible arable cropping on extensive clay areas. The “War Ag” was the single biggest employer of Land Girls and they were managed from its Labour Office in Phoenix Chambers, High Street, Bedford, and housed in “War Ag” hostels. By 1944 the “War Ag” in Bedfordshire had 500 Land Girls in its employ. Young women came from all over the country. Yorkshire made the largest contribution but London, Durham, Lancashire and Essex provided large numbers of girls. They were sent out in teams, each day, to local farms to do all types of seasonal work, threshing, potato picking, hoeing and harvesting.

There were 16 hostels in Bedfordshire occupied at various times during the 8 years from 1942 to 1950. In the north and north east of the county there were hostels at Bolnhurst, Sharnbrook, Milton Ernest, Ravensden (a training hostel), Elstow, Cople Hall, Hassells Hall (Sandy), and Potton.

In Mid-Bedfordshire there were hostels at Hulcote Moors (near Cranfield), Houghton Conquest, and Wrest Park (Silsoe). In the south of the county at Leighton Buzzard, Todddington Park, Kensingworth House, Whipsnade and Wardown Park, Luton.

Most hostel accommodation, apart from purpose-built hutsments, had to be requisitioned from their sometimes-reluctant owners (as at Todddington Park and Cople Hall). They ranged in size from small hostels such as Potton, a small private house for 16, to large country houses such as Cople Hostel with up to 100 Land Girls.

Milton Ernest was the first of these new “War Ag” hostels in Bedfordshire. It opened on Monday 16th February 1942, initially run by the YWCA. It was hutment accommodation, built to a standard Ministry of Works model of three wings, in a T-shaped layout, meeting at the entrance hall, each hostel accommodating 40 young women and 3 resident staff. They were built of brick and wood, with concrete floors, lit by oil lamps and heated by coke stoves.

Hostels were registered as Catering Establishments under the Industrial Category and as such were entitled to special allowances of rationed and priority food, such as extra cheese. Land Girls had to hand over all their ration books.

Hostel life, typically, would involve getting up at 6am, breakfast at 6.30am, leaving in lorry transport at 7am. (8am in winter) to be deposited in small groups at various farms in the area, working all day with a break for a sandwich lunch in the fields, then being collected in the evening at 5.30pm and returning to the hostel and an evening meal at 7pm.

There would be a period of recreation in the dining room, with cocoa issued at 9pm, before lights-outs at 10.30pm. Girls might spend some of their evenings writing home or to boyfriends. Some went out to the nearest pub, from time to time. Others enjoyed sing-songs or listening to gramophone records. A hostel choir was got up for special concerts. Patriotic songs such as “Rose of England” were popular as well as American songs.

Occasionally there were parties at hostels, with men from a local camp invited for a dance. More usually, Land Girls were invited and transported to dances at nearby airfields, especially when the American 8th. Army Air Force arrived in 1942.
AN OUTLINE HISTORY OF BEDFORDSHIRE
WOMEN'S LAND ARMY IN THE 1940s--Part 1
(cont. from page 3, col. 2)

The Americans were generous in helping out with “goodies” in short supply to rationed Britons but not rationed to Americans. Some sent over cooked turkey legs for the girls, since the Americans preferred turkey breasts. At a time when Bedford High Street restaurants were having to offer whale meat, these were luxury items.

Social events in the nearest towns, especially the large centres such as Bedford and Luton, provided highlights in a Land Girl’s life. There were plenty of Allied troops to dance with at the Corn Exchange, Bedford, and high-quality bands to dance to, including the American forces band under Glen Miller during his stay in the area in 1944.

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(Part Two will conclude the article in the next edition.)

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Sir, One of my abiding interests is Antiquarian Archery, so I find it irritating when I hear historians talk of “firing arrows”.
You only fire firearms. I think the order was originally “give fire” and “hold your fire”. In Archery the relevant orders are “loose” and “hold fast” or “fast”, hence the expression playing fast and loose, which referred to a field captain who could not make up his mind. This is one of the many archery cliches which litter our language. Like straight as an arrow and two strings to your bow. Strictly speaking you shoot in a bow not with and you loose an arrow, however, I will allow “shoot with a bow” but please don’t say “fire an arrow”.
Archery is far more deeply engrained in our culture than we realise. How would we know which way to go without arrows to point the direction. Also all trades associated with archery exist today as surnames, i.e. Archer, Bowman, Bowyer, Fletcher, Arrowsmith and Stringer.
A. F. Walker.

New Publications

This book is a comprehensive history of Felmersham and Radwell and includes within the text the results of the author’s fieldwork. One of the more significant pieces of fieldwork is the interpretation, through digital camera techniques, of a wall painting in St Mary’s Church, Felmersham. The author also believes that he may have identified the remains of a mediaeval chapel in Radwell. This well-produced book will appeal to a wide readership because the author has, where possible, placed the local history within the national context.

BYGONE BIGGLESWADE - Volume 2. Pb A5 with 40 pages and 82 photographs each with a caption. Price £4. Most of the photographs have not been published before. Available from Bookworm in Biggleswade, County Town Books, Bedford and the Biggleswade History Society.

STRAW HATS & BONNETS by Joan Curran. Pub. by The Book Castle, price £4.99. Pb A5 90 pages. ISBN 1-903747-45-7. This is the fifth book in the series ‘The Old Trades of Dunstable’. This book is not a history of straw plaiting, but a story of the Dunstable hat manufacturers of the 19th century, when hats were made in factories and the industry was the mainstay of the economy of the town. It begins in the late 18th century and ends in the early 20th. Over those years there were many hat factories in Dunstable, ranging from small family concerns to large firms employing three to four hundred people. Some had only a short existence, others survived for over a century.
To trace the history of every one in detail is beyond the scope of a small book such as. The first part is therefore a general history of the industry in Dunstable from 1785 to 1931, when the last factory closed. The second part is in the form of a hat trail, in which you will find the individual stories of the thirteen major firms.

HISTORY IN BEDFORDSHIRE is published by the BEDFORDSHIRE LOCAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION
Editor: Brian D. Lazelle.
Springfield,
63, Ampthill Road,
Maulden,
Bedford, MK45 2DH.
Telephone: (01525) 402264.
Contributions are welcomed and should be sent to the above address, together with a stamped addressed envelope if the contribution is to be returned. Contributions may be in any readable form, including on IBM compatible disc. If the latter is employed please consult the editor before despatch to avoid compatibility problems.
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