

## My Memories of the Women's Land Army

*by Richard Edeson*

The continuation of the story of Amelia (Mitzi) Edeson

There were different jobs to be done and so we changed around, there would be two of us on the rick throwing the sheaves up to the one on the machine who cut the bands and fed the sheaf into the hole, hoping you wouldn't fall in and come out at the other end in bits with the chaff. Another two would be on the ground, one to lift the hundred weight sacks to one side, the other to remove the chaff. The man who owned it was very dark and swarthy, we called him the ace of spades, he was all right though he fancied himself with the land girls. Some time later we heard that he had had an accident on his machine and his arm had been cut off. It was a dangerous job. One day I was on that rick with my friend Gladys and we noticed that as the ricks was getting lower the men were putting wire netting round it, we asked what was that for they said "oh you'll be all right girls". Having suffered the juvenile antics of some of the lads who had been throwing nests of baby mice at us we were suspicious so we got out of there pronto. They put the dogs in to catch the rats who had all gone to the bottom, there were 70 out of one and 80 out of the other. They hung them on the hedges and the days of us squealing at the sight of a mouse were over. When I first joined it was March and very cold, as it was in April, when we were taken to a farm and told to pick potatoes out of pie, we are puzzled till we found that a pie was a long pile of potatoes covered in soil. We were given buckets and told to pick out the good ones and bag them, the bad ones were very smelly.



It was my 21st birthday, as we were leaving the farmer, a gentleman one of course, said to me "it's not a very good way to spend your 21st is it"? I thought he might have given me a bob or two but he didn't. So back to the hostel a bath and dinner and then down to the Angel Inn in the village. There the RAF and the airborne glider pilots from the nearby aerodrome greeted us, we didn't have much money, so they treated us to a few drinks. I must mention about the first week we were there, my friend Vera and I went for a walk to look around. Vera was a quiet girl, she kept close to me, she thought I knew my way round. We saw this little pub and decided to go in for a shandy. There were only a few old fellows in, "Come in girls come in, don't have a shandy have a perry, it's made with pears, you'll like it. We'd never heard of it, but we bought a glass each of it

for 4 ½ d old money. It was a bitter taste, but the old boys said, "It's good stuff girls have another", we did. When we got outside we staggered, feeling drunk. When we got to the hostel we were very drunk and no one would believe we had got that way on the princely sum of 9d old money. We had very bad heads and the room was spinning round as I lay on my bunk. We heard later that it was old stuff from the bottom of the barrel, I bet those old boys were laughing their socks off for many a day.

Our warden at Kingsland was a Scot she was always saying 'Och girls". She was 50ish, Miss Irving was her name but we called her Och. She'd never ridden a bike so she asked us to teach her, after a few wobbles and falls she mastered it and was very happy, "och girls thank you". She was a good sort and we liked her. Food was one of our main interests, living in a hostel, meant that we just had the normal rations, veg pie was often on the menu, we had one egg a week, it was usually boiled for Sunday breakfast. Sandwiches to take out in our Jock tins were Spam, jam and cheese they were always dry by lunchtime and the farmers' wives were expected to give us a mug of tea if we were near the house. We would be sitting outside often

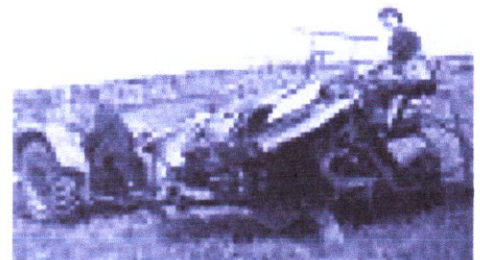


in a barn or cowshed when it was cold, the Italian prisoners of war would be inside in a warm kitchen eating a good dinner, it wasn't as if they worked hard, they didn't. We didn't work in the same fields as them but they would be shouting Bella Bella and blowing kisses, they made corn dollies and they would pass them over to us. The German POW's on the other hand were surly but they were good workers.

To get back to food, when we went to Leominster we always made a beeline to the fish and chip shop. I thought about Mum and Dad when one of the farm lads gave me a rabbit, I sent it home, it had to be wrapped round the middle with head and tail exposed. I had a letter from them saying don't send any more that one was full of pellets

Herefordshire is a lovely county, all the seasons had their own beauty, I remember Dinmore Hill going into Hereford in autumn, with all the trees red and gold it was a lovely sight. Best of all in my eye was spring time, when the apple blossom is out, it really is beautiful, although I must be loyal to our own Yorkshire Dales they take some beating.

To get back to my story my friend Gladys was five foot two



inches like me, sometimes just the two of us would go out on jobs. One farmer used to go to the Home Guard and Tuesday nights so on a Wednesday morning Gladys would say, lets get him to tell us his home guard jokes and prolong us starting work so we would laugh heartily and he was flattered.. I don't think he cottoned on to us, he was a nice man, he was Welsh and he would sing as he worked. We liked working for him. Another time we were dropped off at a lonely place, we made our way to a big house with a big studded door, it was very cold and foggy. We were directed to a field a long way off, and were told to prune a field of bilberries. It was very frosty and we were high up in the clouds it was like a winter Wonderland, beautiful. We were told to prune a field of bilberries. We didn't get any instructions on how to prune, we did our best we never found out if they had any bilberries that year. Then there was the time we were apple picking they were special apples, we had to climb a ladder put our hand under the apple if it came off easily and it was ready. There was an old man who moved the ladder for us, I went to help him, he didn't know I was behind him, so he jammed the ladder into the ground there were spikes on to hold it firm, the spike went into my foot, through my wellies (boot) and thick sock. Talk about blood sweat and tears and soil. I was taken back to the hostel and to the doctors who dressed it no tetanus injections then. I had a lot of pain and a wound that went septic I still have the scar. One of the girls had crocheted a pair of slippers, they were big so she lent them to me I couldn't get my shoe on that foot. The girls called me good deed dotty well dotty I was. The cycles we had were worse for wear, we used to cycle to Leominster it was blackout Some didn't have lamps so the one who had would lead the way, we had many a fall.



One night a few of us went to Leominster with some of our Airborne Friends. I came a cropper, the ARP chaps has some hosepipes across the road I went into them and fell off. I cut my knee pretty badly, Jock my glider pilot friend took me into a pub and put a field dressing on my knee. I got some funny looks from people in the pub, huh those land girls. You will have gathered that I was accident- prone I still am I can fall over a feather.

When we were working in the fields, there were no toilet facilities, so to answer the call of nature, we would go behind a hedge hoping no one would see us, spending a penny, was OK. after we had undone the belt and the dungaree straps but to have a two penny one was more of a problem, we rarely had any paper so a good strong dock leaf had to do. There was always the perils of nettles, many a nettled bum was had. Hygiene well who cared, we would be muck spreading and mucking out the cowsheds and still eat our sandwiches. We were sent to some very lonely places, we would find a little cottage in the middle of nowhere, a farm worker would live there often on his own very primitive.

We would help with the hop picking in September, we weren't allowed to pick them, the families from around would do that, we would pull the binds down for them to strip and help with the weighing.

At Kingsland our clerk driver Miss Freeman who was engaged to a RAF pilot he was so good looking. When he was on leave he would come to the hostel for her, we all thought he was lovely, he had a sports car. There we were looking through the windows sighing, she would laugh at us. When they got married, we were all invited to form a guard of honour outside the Church and to go to the reception. Her parents owned the Royal Oak Hotel so a lovely meal was provided, a very nice time was had by all.

We were lucky in a way, that we had Mr Williams, he and his wife had the local post office and he drove the village taxi, he would take us to the aerodrome to dance and bring us home. Sometimes if we had had a hard day he would listen to us grumbling and he said, "you know I went through hell in the last war, but I still look back on them as happy days and you will be in time". He was right my land army days were happy, we worked hard but when we had done our



time was our own we were young and ready to enjoy ourselves.

When we went home on leave, the trains were always crowded, the train would often stop for a long time outside Crewe station when the raids were on, when we changed trains we would go for a cup of tea, there weren't any cups so it was in a jam jar, try drinking hot tea from a jam-jar, not good!! We were allowed a spoonful of sugar the spoon was on a string, I expect if they got pinched they would have a job replacing it. At Leeds station YMCA there were boards on the floor and weary servicemen were sleeping on them.

One Saturday in summer it was a lovely day, so six of us went cycling in Wales. The weather was hot the countryside beautiful. We took a picnic, then looked for somewhere for a drink, there was a little pub just one room, we trooped in wearing our sun tops and shorts, there were a few men in, and one behind the bar a woman who we guessed was the landlady, she looked like Queen Victoria, dressed in black from head to toe. She eyed us up and down and ordered us out, we said we only want a shandy, but we had to go. A man followed us out he said so sorry girls I'll bring you one out here. We sat on a bench, there was a parrot in the doorway who kept screeching pretty Polly. It was a laugh, we had a lovely day out. In summer we used to get a lovely tan and my fair hair got bleached blonde with the Sun. We cut the legs of our dungarees and wore sun tops, we got scratched legs from the hay and corn but we didn't care. The old boys enjoyed seeing us as they got an eyeful, but their wives weren't pleased.



Gladys hated her name, so she told her boy friends her name was Tina, one night a Canadian pilot called for her, he asked for Tina, Och looked puzzled and was about to say, there's no Tina here, when Gladys came rushing through, "here I am" and whisked him away. She was good fun and much more a Tina than a Gladys. When we went to the village hops all dolled up, she would look round and say he's mine Mitzi the one wearing the wellies. We got on well, we had the same nature, she came from Keithley. She had a young brother and she said, when anyone came to tea he was told to only take one cake, but he always took two, so she would kick him under the table while smiling sweetly at the guests. I knew what it was like, being the only girl with three brothers, who at that time were all in the forces. Harry in the Merchant Navy an engineer officer, Ernest in the RAF aircrew and Desmond the youngest, in the Royal Engineers. I have a photo of all of us together taken in the back garden when we were on leave we are in our uniforms, it is one that I treasure. There is a lot more I could write about my time at Kingsland. I was happy there, we didn't get much money so when another girl Marion and I were asked to go on a course to become group leaders Marion said come on, it's 10 shillings a week more, I allowed myself to be persuaded. I think I thought we would be coming back to Kingsland. We were sent to a big house, there were girls from Gloucester and Worcester, we were given talks and taking out to different farms. I remember one dairy farm of Jersey cows they were lovely their milk was like the thick cream, too rich for me. We also went to Bulmers cider factory and saw where all the cider apples ended up. One of our jobs was to pick them well we had an iron hook to shake the trees then pick them up or shovel them into sacks. To get back to the course we had to do exams, and we all passed. We went back to Kingsland after a few weeks we got a letter to say we had to take charge of a new hostel about four miles away Bircher Hall. I didn't want to leave my friends but I had to go that's what the lure of extra money does.

Bircher Hall was a lovely place, with lots of grounds, the man who owned it lived in the front. We were in the back there was plenty of room, we had proper bedrooms and beds. There was a lodge at the end of the drive but it was empty. Our warden was called Miss Bach, she was a true lady, gentle and refined, a bit taken aback I think by all of us, these ladies had these jobs for their war work. We had a cook and two girls who did the cleaning. The land army girls were from Lancashire, most of them were new but a few came from other hostels. Our job was to show them how to go on, we were like fore women but were called group leaders, Marion could drive so she got the job as clerk driver. I haven't mentioned double summer time, when daylight seemed to go on forever it was to enable the farm workers to work long hours. We had our set hours to work so we didn't do the same as them.



Most of their younger men were in the forces, so the men who were left were older, they worked very hard. One we knew, had had an accident when he was young, with some farm equipment, he had his hand cut off, it didn't stop him from being a good worker, we used to watch him change his hook for different jobs he was a jolly man never complained.

Bircher Hall was situated six miles from Ludlow and four from Leominster we usually went to Leominster, cycling there to go dancing or the pictures and shopping.

About this time the Americans came, they were stationed in the area, the first time we saw them we thought they were all officers, their uniforms were gaberdine and they wore collar and ties very smart so different to our soldiers in their rough khaki uniforms. They were like film stars



and had badges for everything, gee honey this one is for sharp shooting and so on. Our lads would say they get a medal for the one who can spit furthest, a bit of jealousy there I think, although they could have been right. The first ones to arrive were the Rangers, now they were supposed to be like our commandos, but they were not as tough. One I met came from Chicago he said "Honey when I get back I'm going to be mayor of Chicago". When they left we went to the pictures it was a Deana Durbin, she sang, "say a prayer for the boys over there", there was a lot of sobbing in that cinema, there were a few broken or "bent hearts". They liked girls and were polite, it was "honey you look like a million dollars in that dress" or "baby when this war is over I'm taking you back to the States". Oh yes you took it all with a pinch of salt, well you did if you had any sense. They brightened our lives, even Miss Bach liked them, she asked them to tea, they brought tins of food hershy choc bars, and salted peanuts and lovely cakes. They were told they mustn't eat any of the English people's rations, as we hadn't enough food for ourselves, too right. If you went into a cafe With an American GI, you got better service, they expected good service and they got it, cakes would appear, which we never saw.

We would cycle into Leominster and leave our bikes at the local fire station the fellows would look after them for us, while we went to the Dance, we wore our civvies when we went out, the GI's would say don't wear those goddam breeches honey. they liked to jitterbug, we always enjoyed ourselves, when I hear a Glenn Miller record now memories come, flooding back, one night we went to leave our bikes, the fireman said, stay here girls there's some trouble in town we watched as US army trucks were roaring up and down the road full of MPs military police. There was fighting and shouting the trouble was between the black and white soldiers, the fireman said get a off home girls before it gets any worse. So we did cycling like mad to get away, after that they had black or white nights to stop any more trouble it was a sad state of affairs.

Three of us went out together, Vi, Marion, and three American boy friends they were Jerry, Barney and Jack. One day we went for a picnic by the river, they brought crusty bread, fried chicken and cheese and wine, I kept my wine glass for ages, I don't think I'd ever tasted wine before. They were great guys, I wonder what became of them. These good times were of course on our time off, we worked very hard, they would say to us, "you work too hard baby, when this war is over your daddy will take you over to the States". I wonder how many made it back after D Day, and all that followed.

My name is Amelia, and like Gladys I hated it, I was called Mitzi when I was a little, because I was always talking about Mitzi Green the girl in the our Gang films. One GI said Mitzi is that your real name, I said yes I'm Fraulien Mitzi Rockmeyer, he said "you lie more than a mattress". we had a girl from London, Stepney, she worried about her family in the Blitz, she was called Louise, and the Americans called her Daisy Mae, she had blond hair, she said to me who's this Daisy Mae, it's a comic strip in their papers about Hill Billies, and she is the blonde girl, Lou said and I don't know whether I like that. One job I went on with lou was to Croft Castle, to do some gardening for a Mrs Parr, her brother owned the castle which was taken over by a school, Mrs Parr lived in the lodge, we cycled up the long drive it was a lovely place there were red squirrels darting about in the trees, she wanted potatoes planting etc, there was a lot of digging to do, after a while Lou said to me, slowdown Mitzi only Fools and horses work, it was the first time I'd heard that expression,

I must mention the V jolly evenings that were arranged for us, entertainment it was called, one was a musical evening they brought some ancient records, one was little Polly Perkins from Paddington Green how we kept our faces straight I'll never know another time some players came and did an excerpt from Helen of Troy, now Helen was played by a very plain lady who was not so young, so when the hero said oh beautiful Helen the face that launched a 1000 ships someone muttered sank them more like, we fell about laughing ignorant lot that we were. Oh, the glares we got, but we couldn't help it. Then we had a very intense lady who came to talk to us about personal hygiene, on the importance of washing our hands, hair and bodies good to tell that she had never worked in the fields. And once we had a magic lantern show we used to wonder which century they thought we were in.

Some weekends Marion, Vi and myself would go to Ludlow for a bit of shopping; we would have our tea in the De Grays cafe (it's still there) and we would go to a the cinema we would be

waiting for the bus on cold frosty nights listening to the Church bells playing tunes.

Well, I could go on forever, I did four years in the land army and came out in December after the war was over 1945, I'd had enough and was ready for civvy street I weighed seven stone, I had a doctor's note, I had among other things a bad back, which I suffer from to this day. They were good years with good friends, I came back to Marks and Spencer and met my future husband, he had done six years service in the Royal Engineers, he used to call me his cabbage commando. I read a book recently, it was called Cinderella's of the soil, we were that all right, we didn't get any gratuity despite the fact that we had a very small wage we were given our certificate thanking us for our loyal and devoted service, signed by Queen Elizabeth later the Queen Mother we had to hand our uniforms in, I don't know what they did with them. However it's in the past given the same circumstances I would do it again even though now I have a pacemaker, arthritis in knees and hips, and aching! Aching! Back!

A Edeson June 2003.

*So here is a little reminder .....*



Two land army girls stood at the Golden Gates,  
their weary heads bent low,  
they asked the keeper at the gates,  
the way that they should go,  
what have you done in the world below,  
to gain admission here,  
we've worked said they,  
in the W L A for many a weary year,  
come right inside St Peter said,  
as he loudly rang the bell,  
you have had your share of hell!!



*Thank you Des for directing me to this article; it's been fascinating. All the photos used are extra to the story and were downloaded from the BBC's Women's Land Army Archive.*

Postscript....

The Hostel was a long wooden building situated where the Cobnash Industrial Estate is now. It was home to the Land Army girls for the duration of the war. After the war it was home to many families, up to eight at any one time (?), and managed by the Local Authority. Sometime in the 1970s it was demolished and the land was sold and developed as an Industrial Estate.