

## HERITAGE CIRCLE

### Nicky Reynolds, The Women's Land Army

Nicky Reynolds gave a very interesting talk about the Women's Land Army to the January meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. It was based on her extensive research on the subject which stretches back over 25 years.

Women have always had a supporting role in agriculture, for example at harvest time or for stock rearing, but they were rarely managers in the past. Changes in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such as developments in farming and the women's suffrage movement, encouraged women to consider agriculture as a possible career. The process was accelerated during 1915 when women were invited to volunteer to work on the land to replace men who had enlisted in the army. By late 1916, 2,000 women were organised by county committees with local supervisors and were given a uniform. This was formalised in January 1917 with the creation of the Women's Land Army (WLA).

Volunteers worked in one of three corps, the Agriculture Section, the Forage Corps or the Timber Section. There were parades and posters offering an idealised view of the role to encourage others to join the WLA. However, joining was not an easy process. The work was hard and so women were interviewed and given a medical. It was not a military organisation. Women were employed by farmers, not the state, but it was disciplined as it had uniforms, a code of conduct and gave rewards for good service. By late 1919 when the WLA was disbanded, 27,000 women had served. They had made a significant contribution to the war effort.

Fears of war in June 1939 encouraged Lady Denman, who had been prominent in the WLA during World War I, to begin to recruit women and deploy them on the land. There were nearly 5,000 recruits by September 1939. Rallies romanticised the WLA as a 'Happy, healthy job.' The organisation looked for women aged 16-40 who were physically fit. Most were not married. The life was too difficult for some women, especially the very young, and so there was a high runaway rate but for others it was an attractive offer of adventure and independence. Women could be sent anywhere in the country.

Many features of the WLA model for World War I were reused after 1939. Volunteers could apply at a post office or at a county recruiting centre. They were vetted through an interview and a medical. They were given some basic training and allocated to farms. Some women worked on a number of farms as a group. They either lived on the farm or in a hostel. They were initially paid 28s a week which was well below the average wage of men. In 1943 conditions were improved by higher pay, standard board and lodging charges, and some holiday. They worked about 50 hours a week with one half day of free time, but their hours could increase to 100 a week during harvest time.

Work on the land was hard and physical. It included digging, hoeing, ditch clearing, ploughing, stone picking, and dung spreading. Some women had to deal with pests, like rats or moles. Others did fruit and vegetable picking and packing. They worked in all weathers. The physical and moral care of women was monitored locally and the WLA encouraged a supportive, friendly culture. By 1943 there were 80,000 Land Girls but numbers gradually decreased as prisoners of war were increasingly deployed.

The WLA was disbanded in 1950 by which time over 200,000 women had served as Land Girls. However, the service of the WLA to the nation was not officially recognised until November 2000 when representatives were invited to the Remembrance Service at the Cenotaph for the first time. A memorial was erected in Whitehall in 2006.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be on Wednesday 23 February at Rickinghall Village Hall when Geoffrey Robinson will give a talk entitled *The Worlingworth Feast Painting – a commemoration of the Golden Jubilee of George III*. New members and visitors are very welcome. Further information is available at [www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net](http://www.heritagecircle.onsuffolk.net).

Gerry Gurhy