

## Memoirs of a Fovant Land Girl

Born and raised in the Anfield area of Liverpool, I was 12 when war broke out. The school and children were evacuated to Wales, but I refused to go, telling my mother if anything happened to them I wanted to be there, however, the thought of missing school for the length of the war also seemed an interesting prospect. Then Mother signed up to do 'home school' as did other mothers whose children weren't evacuated, so I didn't escape after all! Every day lessons were taught in a different house which was at least slightly more interesting. Liverpool was targeted immediately due to the importance of the docks but in August 1940 and the start of the Liverpool Blitz, life changed considerably. Gradually the landscape around us changed as more and more houses suffered direct hits. Every night we slept in an air raid shelter, about 8 - 10 of us sleeping on pallets. Sometimes we had to comfort someone who was frightened, but on the whole we remained cheerful. We would leave about eight in the morning after the All Clear, emerging to check out the damage that had been done overnight and everyone concerned about the possibility of being homeless. One family joined another family in their house to spend the night under the kitchen table instead of the shelter, and in the morning I discovered that the whole house had been razed to the ground, both families dead. I remember another time when a lady had bought a new hat for a family wedding and after learning her house had been bombed overnight all she could think of was ... "but my new hat, oh, my new hat!" We were all living on rations and when Mother went to market she would ask everyone in the street if they wanted a rabbit for the pot. The blitz lasted for five months causing huge devastation and even after that we were constantly being randomly bombed.

At 14 I went to work at Jacobs Biscuit factory, always with my gas mask over my shoulder. About this time one of the leaders from the Girl Guides started taking some of the Guides on a Sunday trip to help out at a nearby agricultural farm. I went along regularly and got to enjoy helping to tend the fields. Later I left Jacobs and went to work in a Forces' food factory, sorting sugar, tea and dried milk into small tins, packing them up in bags, ready to send off to the troops. My friends and I would put little notes in the top of the bags saying, "If you are young and free, please write to me". I received a letter back and we corresponded for a while but only after all the letters - both to and from - were carefully censored by Mother.

Through Sundays on the farm I decided to join the Land Army, despite a promise previously made to my brother (who was serving in the RAF) that I would never join any of the services. One lunch hour, without telling Mother, I joined up, then worried all afternoon about how I was going to tell her. I decided it was best to have my tea first in case things didn't go my way, but both parents took the news well and I think Mother was probably proud that I wanted to do my bit.

It took about 6 weeks for my uniform to arrive consisting of Air-tex shirt, green tie, green pullover, brown corduroy breeches, long brown woolen socks and lace up shoes, a thick woolen coat and hat, brown overalls for field work and white dungarees for milking. Mother took me to the station to see me off to the training camp and even though I had never been away from home before and was nervous, I couldn't understand why she kept crying. It took me a good few years and the birth of my own children to understand why. Her parting words to me were "Don't go with any boys, make sure you go to Church, and don't go to any pubs".

At the station we met up with some other girls going to the same place so we travelled together and helped each other find the way when we had to change trains. Our destination was an agricultural college in Bridge End Wales. We were met at the station and taken to our new temporary 'home'. I was to share a dormitory with seven other girls, four of us from Lancashire and four Welsh. For that first evening we all seemed to spend a lot of energy putting on a brave face but sometime after 'lights out' one of the girls asked me to put the light back on as I was the one nearest to the switch. We then discovered that we had all been crying and were homesick, but the discovery made us laugh and broke the ice. After that we became firm friends.

Next day after breakfast we were all given jobs - I and four others had to learn to milk a cow. I had never seen a cow before, let alone milk one! It wasn't easy. Squat on the stool, hold the bucket between your knees, firmly squeeze the teats and aim the milk into the bucket. But I kept worrying about what the cow behind me was doing - or going to do - instead of concentrating on mine. It took a few days to get the hang of it, at first I just couldn't get the milk to run - those cows knew when they were being tended by a novice. By the end of that first week my legs were black and blue from being kicked, but gradually over the coming weeks, the cows and I came to some sort of understanding. Once the milking was done and the cows put out to graze we had to clean out the parlour before

walking back to college for lunch, then back again in the afternoon to start the whole process again.

Immediately after training, I was sent to a farm in Calne, Wiltshire. It was sad to say goodbye to my friends as we had come to rely on each other in the absence of our families, but we were all posted to different areas. It was explained to me where I was to go but I had to make my own way there. I arrived in Calne in the afternoon and was met by the owners of the farm - two brothers, and two sisters. One brother had brought his bike so he went on ahead with my case strapped to the back, and I walked with the others. Communication was awkward at first as I couldn't understand a word they said, they all had such strong Wiltshire accents. In turn they of course struggled with my Liverpool accent. I sensed then that this wasn't going to be an easy relationship. On arrival at the farm I was shown to my room and told to come down for tea when I was ready. By this time I was starving as I had hardly eaten anything all day, so I quickly unpacked and presented myself downstairs for tea. This turned out to be one boiled egg - with a little cosy on top. Disappointed but determined to be polite, I started to remove the little egg's hat only to then discover that the Bodwins were strict Plymouth Brethren and no food could be touched until after prayers and bible readings. That evening I went back to my room feeling very homesick, lonely and hungry. Next day was a Sunday. By now absolutely ravenous, I went down for breakfast, but this was preceded by so many prayers and bible discussions I began to feel faint from lack of food. After breakfast they were all going to church. However, one of the sisters told me I couldn't join them at their chapel in the morning, but I could in the evening and if I wanted a morning service to take myself into Calne and find myself a church. With my mother's last words ringing in my ears about making sure I attended church, I made my way into Calne to see if I could find one. On the way I passed an elderly couple who asked if I was lost. Explaining the situation they kindly invited me to join them, not only for the church service but also back home for tea. Although the Bodwins were not at all friendly, not even liking me receiving mail from home, the housekeeper was a very nice lady who took me under her wing and I stayed with her until my time in Calne was up. There were two RAF camps in Calne (which was rather nice) and the airmen used to go down to the YMCA on a Sunday evening, having to pass the Plymouth Brethren chapel on the way. The Bodwins would stand outside the chapel, grab the men and force them into the service. In the end, the men took to taking a diversion which was further to walk to the YMCA but avoided the chapel.

I became very friendly with a girl (Jean) who lived next door to the housekeeper and one day I asked if she wanted to walk into town with me and go to the YMCA. However, when we got there we weren't allowed in because we weren't in the Forces and therefore not far from home. I was in uniform and argued the point - "well, how far's Liverpool then?" Two airmen who had overheard the argument stood up for us saying 'these girls do a good job' and in the end we were allowed in. So it became a regular thing for us to go and spend the evening with the Airmen who in turn would walk us back home - which again, was quite nice! One evening we were queuing to get into the pictures when I asked Jean if she could understand what the Airmen behind us were talking about. It turned out they were Dutch but spoke very good English, so we got chatting. Next day I was told that an Airman was waiting outside for me. "No, not for me" I said, "he'll be waiting for Jean", but when I went up to him he said he was waiting for me. We then went out together for the rest of my time in Calne, until I had to leave .....(He was very nice).

After about 3 months the farm went bankrupt (all that praying) and I had to move on. My next assignment was Ham Cross Farm, between Tisbury and Fovant.

My instructions were to get myself to Tisbury. I travelled by bus from Calne to Devizes and Devizes to Salisbury, then on to Tisbury. I was dropped in The Avenue late in the afternoon. There were no houses around and nobody to meet me. I thought "where the heck do I go now?" Eventually I asked someone where the farm was and was told it was too far to walk especially in November and carrying all my kit, but I did manage to get a taxi. At last I knocked on the door of the farmhouse, by now very tired and fed up. The door was opened by the daughter who gave me no greeting just barked "Where's Mum and Dad?" "You tell me" I replied. Later, we found out the problem. The Land Girl Representative had told me to go to Tisbury to be met by Mr. and Mrs. Stokes - but told them to meet me at Salisbury station. They waited for me for a long time which was not the best of starts, but we soon became friends and they treated me very well, almost like one of the family. That evening Mr. Stokes announced I needn't get up at the usual time of 4.30 but to settle in first. I breathed a sigh of relief and didn't need asking twice.

I stayed at Ham Cross until 1949 when I left to get married. I worked in the dairy seven days a week, starting at 4.30 for milking, then cleaning out the parlour, stores and farmyard. Break for lunch then second milking about 2 - 2.30. Finished about 5pm apart from harvesting and hay making. It was hard work, the churns were very heavy. We had

to tip the full buckets of milk into the cooler, then into churns and then lift the churns onto the farm wall for the lorry to collect. One day I slipped in the dairy and cracked my ribs on the edge of the cooler. I went to see Dr. Clay and he strapped them up really tight, saying "No work for you miss".....but of course I did. Another time I was just leaving work after a long day and suddenly Mr. Stokes started to shout at me to get into the barn and stay there. "But ....but...why?"... I protested but he just shouted at me again to stay in the barn. Something dreadful must have happened I thought as burning with curiosity I did as I was told but managed to climb up onto a stool and peer through a little window. I was just in time to see the men putting the bull to a cow. All this fuss after I had helped with the calving. He obviously thought it was ok to help get the calves out but not to see how they got in in the first place!

Once I got used to the long hours I started to go to the Fovant Youth Club, at this time held in the Legion Hut. I became friends with Lil Trent who lived in Fovant and we would cycle down to the club to attend parties and dances. Other times we went to dances held in Dinton village hall. Looking back I don't know how I managed to work all day, cycle down to Fovant or Dinton in the evening, cycle back in the dark around midnight and then be up for the cows at 4.30 the following morning. Also attending the Youth Club were the Airmen from Chilmark, which was nice ...

Days off were rare but if I did have one I would have to pay one of the men to do the milking. Lil and I would then cycle into Salisbury, invariably to go to the cinema cafe which was on the top floor of the current cinema. We would have tea, do some people watching and then cycle back home again.

Christmas came but I wasn't allowed leave. It was explained to me that it wouldn't be fair on the men. I did point out that the men went home every day after they had finished work, but it made no difference and I never was allowed a Christmas leave. The cows still had to be milked and cleaned out so it was 'business as usual' as far as that was concerned but once the job was done there was always a good Christmas dinner and presents, before having to go out again for the afternoon milking. In the evening, the farm workers and families joined us at the house and it was generally a very merry time.

One year there was a concert arranged at the Youth Club. Everyone helped or performed and it was great fun. Other well known Fovant names were there, including Mary Lee, the

Reed's sons from the Pembroke Arms, and Roy and Mary Simper. It was a great success and the show went on to perform in Tisbury and Shaftesbury. I found it hard with all the late nights and 4.30 starts - it took ages just to remove all the grease paint - but I really enjoyed it.

I didn't get leave until the following April. By now I had been away for 12 months and I was very excited about going home again. I was allowed seven days leave, but two of those days would be taken up with travelling. Mrs. Stokes gave me a large slab of butter to take for Mother, a real luxury then as food was still being rationed. The first part of the journey was uneventful, but the train from Euston to Liverpool was packed, mainly with Forces travelling home. My carriage was full of sailors, which made for a lively journey but at the same time I was worried about having to disembark at Lime Street Station at night. I hadn't told my mother when to expect me which was also of some concern as I knew she would be cross; Lime Street had a very bad reputation and there was a saying if you saw a woman in a fur coat - she'd been down Lime Street. When I finally got off the train I'd worked myself up so much that I didn't dare leave the station and go out onto the street, so I upended my case and sat on it giving myself time to think about what I was going to do. After a while one of the sailors who had been in my carriage came along and asked me what was the matter. After explaining my predicament he kindly offered to take me home, even though he really needed to go in the opposite direction. He carried my large case and I carried his smaller one. As we made our way in single file through the crowds, two Chinese came at me from the side, grabbed an arm each and started to carry me off. The sailor quickly hit the back of them with my suitcase causing the Chinese to let go of me and run off. Thank goodness I hadn't attempted to leave the station on my own. On reaching home my mother was as nice as pie to the sailor, thanking him profusely for bringing me home, but as soon as he left she let rip about not letting her know when I was due to arrive. However, on producing Mrs. Stokes' slab of butter, her face lit up with pure joy and happily everything was forgotten. I spent the week catching up with all my school friends, who in turn treated me like I was a famous explorer.

In four and half years I only got home four times as I had to avoid Christmas, haymaking and harvesting. Once, when mother had taken me to the station to see me off, I was hanging out of the window waving to her when my hat blew off. I was so worried about having to tell the Land Army Rep. that I had lost my hat that I kept quiet and hoped for the

best. 'The best' happened quite soon after when a new beret was introduced, so I managed to scrape through that problem ok.

At a Youth Club outing to Brighton, a girl friend invited her brother and his best friend and we all sat together on the coach. Sometime later, whilst riding to town on the bus to meet my current boyfriend - Peter - I met up with the 'best friend' again. I had thought I was supposed to be meeting Peter at the station, but he didn't turn up. After a while, the 'best friend' said "well, you might as well come to the pictures with me", so off we went. This was Ken, of course. I didn't know it then, but he was to become my soul mate. Later Peter told me he had been waiting for me somewhere else. Eventually, Peter and his whole family moved to Australia. He tried to get me to go with him, and I may have done if he'd agreed to marry me first so that I could have a proper English wedding with all my family attending. But Peter insisted we would get married once we were in Australia and I was afraid if things went wrong once we were there and he didn't marry me, I would be stuck on the other side of the world, a very long way from home.

Soon after, I started going out with Ken and one day I was invited to his house in Weeping Ash to have tea with his parents for the first time. I already knew his father as he worked on the railway near the farm and he would often see me labouring in the fields. Apparently he complained to his wife one day that "that poor girl has been out cutting thistles all day!" However, I had never met Ken's mother. As I entered the house, keen to give a good impression, I adjusted my dress and carefully wiped my feet - but unfortunately, she had polished the floor under the mat and I slipped and skidded on my backside all the way into the sitting room. I looked up to see their surprised expressions and said "well that's a good entrance isn't it".

Within the year Ken and I were married, and in the November we moved into number 2 Holme Lea Cottage next door to where I still live 69 years later.

Of course, before getting married I had to seek permission for release from the WLA. Fortunately it was granted, and I left on the 21st October 1949. I had very much enjoyed my years working on the farm, despite my Liverpool Aunties predicting when I told them I had joined up "A girl like you doing farm work? You won't last five minutes". I had particularly enjoyed my time with Mr. and Mrs. Stokes because they treated me so well. I was instructed to return my uniform to headquarters in London but was allowed to keep my

overcoat, one pair of shoes, a pair of trousers and a shirt. The wedding took place in St. George's Church and all my close family from Liverpool attended. My good friend Lil Trent and my sister in law were bridesmaids. My in-laws hosted the reception in their house so it was a bit cramped but they gave us a very good 'do' and it was a very happy day. We honeymooned in London for a week, enjoying the Lord Mayor's Show, the theatre and all the sights.

Back to Fovant and we moved into our new home. Mrs. Simper and Mrs. Mullins helped me settle in and were very good to me, but it was a long time before everyone stopped referring to me as a foreigner. There was no running water or sewerage in the village at that time, in fact on my father's first visit he asked where he should fill the kettle to make tea. On being told at the tap down the road, he remarked "Whatever has she come to?!" There was an outside toilet and a bucket collection once a week. Eventually, everyone was connected to running water in 1951, just before my first child was born. To house the new bathroom an extension had to be built at the back of both cottages, and alterations to the layout inside - we didn't know ourselves when it was all done!

Ken continued with his job at Wilton Land Command, commuting on the bus until the sixties when we were able to buy a car. I remained happily a housewife at home, looking after two children as Barry followed Shirley in 1956. I didn't need to go elsewhere as Fovant then boasted a post office (The Old Post Office at the end of the High Street, a butchers at Lindthorpe House, a handy store next door to Latymer House and the main Fovant Stores where they baked their own bread (the baker lived in Baker's Cottage on the High Street). There was also a coal merchant in Brook Street and of course Levers Garage. Ken's Grandmother lived in Bowerchalke and sometimes I would cycle up to see her, pushing the bike with Barry in his seat on the back, all the way up the big hill. We would then be back in time to pick Shirley up from Fovant school. I also ran the Sunday school at Chapel.

Shortly after Barry was born, the old lady who owned both cottages and lived next door, decided to sell up and offered them both to Ken for the princely sum of £1200. Ken wanted to go ahead but I worried about how we would pay for them. In the end I gave in, we borrowed the money and then worked hard to pay it back. We then moved in to No 1 where I live now, and my sister-in-law moved into No.2. My sister-in-law was ok and I got on with her, but she was extremely house proud so that the minute you stood up she was

behind you plumping up the cushions. This prompted my mother to quietly ask me if there was something wrong with her!

Ken and I were happily married for nearly 50 years until he died just before our golden wedding anniversary. The WLA demobilised shortly after I left in 1949 and society quickly returned to the pre-war distinctions regarding what women could and could not do. Official recognition took over 60 years . In December 2007 DEFRA announced that the efforts of the WLA and WTC (Women's Timber Corps) would be formally recognised with the presentation of a specially designed commemorative badge to the existing members. The badge of honour was awarded in July 2008 to over 45,000 former Land Girls. In October 2012, the Prince of Wales unveiled the first memorial to the WLA, on the Fochabers Estate in Moray, Scotland. In October 2014 a memorial statue to both the WLA and the WTC was unveiled in the National Arboretum in Staffordshire, England.

I remain proud of my badge and the small part I played in 'doing my bit' during and after the second world war.