

I joined the Women's Land Army on the Saturday of an August Bank Holiday. I travelled by train to Lincoln, and then on the village bus to Branston, expecting to be met by car - but no car was waiting. After making enquiries from a local boy I found that Branston Hall, which was my destination, was three miles away. He very kindly offered to show me the way and carried my case for me.

When I eventually arrived I found that most of the girls were away for the weekend, and that only the Warden and Assistant Warden were there. As I went in I heard the kettle singing and soon had that very welcome cup of tea after my long walk.

The Hall was a fine old farmhouse, surrounded by several acres of ground, which we eventually cultivated into flower and vegetable gardens. There was also a large orchard and a fine lawn, which we used later as a tennis court. The farm outbuildings were still in use, mainly for storing fodder; the only live inhabitant was the Old Bull, and we kept well away from him.

The main building had been converted to accommodate about 50 girls. We all had bunk beds and there were 8 girls in each room; we each had a small wardrobe and shared a dressing table with one other girl.

There were two bathrooms each with 4 washbasins and 1 bath, so it was a case of first come first served. There was a large dining room, recreation room, quiet room, laundry, Wardens office, and a huge farmhouse kitchen. After the quiet of the weekend the return of all the girls on Monday evening was almost overwhelming, although very pleasant. The majority of the girls came from Yorkshire so I soon made friends, and started to settle down to working on the land.

We were awakened from our slumbers at 6 am and our working day on the farm started at 7.30. Six of us were sent to work on one farm doing general farming.

My first jobs were harvesting corn, learning to stook and building cornstacks; -these are the romantic jobs of agriculture, sun burnt mirth and all that, although tiring and back aching at first. During this busy season we worked until dusk, and one day as the last sheaf of corn was being tossed onto the stack, I had the misfortune to get the pitchfork stuck in my arm. I was hurriedly taken off to the village Doctor for a tetanus injection. The following morning my arm was very stiff and I was given a weeks rest and made satisfactory progress

The farm extended well out into the Fenlands, and we often had to cycle 5 or 6 miles to work. When working that way it was always a problem to know where to "spend a penny". The only places at all suitable were in the ditches or behind a haystack.

After finishing work one day three of us were making use of a haystack, before cycling the long way home, when our gentleman farmer and his young student walked round from the other side and caught us in the act. There was a hasty retreat with straps flying by us all, and I think this was one of our most embarrassing moments, although we will never be really sure who was the most embarrassed, the men or us, especially as we later had to face them to get our orders for the following days work.

When the harvest was all gathered in, we were surprised to receive an invitation to our first evening harvest supper. It was a very enjoyable evening; all the farm labourers and their wives were there. Plenty of good food, home-cured ham, homemade pork pies and salad, fresh cream and fruit and drinks in plenty. The Farmer had arranged for a Concert Party to entertain us in the Village Hall, which rounded off a very pleasant evening.

In wintertime work on the land wasn't so inviting, with rain, snow and ice. Many of us after cycling 5 or 6 miles each morning would be almost in tears with frozen fingers. This was the time of the year when many of the girls decided they couldn't carry on, and left for their own homes; but the majority of us, although we might stand in tears amid the alien corn and potatoes etc., we stuck it out.

Some of the jobs, even in winter, could be enjoyed such as threshing, as we had to work hard all the time to keep the machine fed, and this kept us all warm.

Another cold weather job was muck-spreading, it was usually put in small heaps all over the field, and as we spread each heap around, more often than not we would find nests of baby mice, little blind pink wriggling things, about an inch long. It made ones tummy feel a bit upset at first, but as we carried on we thought nothing of it.

Sugar beet bashing, as we called it, was a nice warm job, pick up two beets, give them a good bash together to remove the dirt, and then lay them in straight rows ready for the next operation. We used an ugly curved knife with a point on the end, stuck the point in the beet to pick it up, then sliced off the top and piled the beet into heaps. One outing we had was to the sugar-beet factory to see our beet go through the refining process, it was very interesting to watch the sugar beet being processed, slowly change into lovely golden crystals and then into the pure white sugar as we know it.

When the weather was too bad and we could not possibly go on the land, there were always plenty of indoor jobs to keep us busy, such as: grinding cow cake and other foodstuffs for the animals, mending sacks - none of us cared for this job - oiling, greasing, and care of machinery, sharpening and cleaning tools.

One time we had to whitewash six pigsties, we had plenty of fun over this. As each sty was ready, we had to get the pigs back into them, and of course one pig always had to be difficult and lead us a merry chase. By the end of the afternoon we were covered in whitewash and quite exhausted.

It was during the winter months that the girls had to make their own entertainment. We often had singsongs around the old piano, the two girls who were very good players were always in great demand. Social evenings were also arranged as the R.A.F. and Army camps could always manage transport facilities. The Warden too was always around and sharp at 10.15 the men were sent packing. Looking back now, I realise that she had a great responsibility looking after so many teenage girls, and she did a good job too, and was most fair when any problems arose.

The girls came from all walks of life, shop assistants, factory girls, office workers, hairdressers, and such like. On the whole I think we all got along very well together. Some of them were full of life - I remember two girls from Leeds, they always gave a dancing exhibition whenever they felt in the mood, and soon had the room in an uproar.

Enid, one of the girls in our dormitory was always talking in her sleep, and she got teased terribly about it, she could take it alright though, but she was awfully cross with herself at times when she awoke in the mornings, and found she had taken out all her curlers while sleeping, and her hair was still straight.

I stayed at this hostel for two years, and then had a move to Lymington in Hampshire, where I was billeted in a private home. My Landlady was fairly young and she had one child, a baby girl of about nine months old, her husband was abroad in the Army and she was pleased to have me around for company.

I went to work in the gardens of an Orphanage for Seaman's Boys. This work was quite interesting but very different from farm work, but much easier really. There were two large greenhouses, which were used only for growing tomatoes; it was a nice change to be in the warm after a cold winter on the Fenlands.

The boys helped during holidays in the vegetable gardens, and were always getting up to mischief. On various occasions we would find a charming sand lizard in our lunch pack, and often got a squirt of water in our faces when they managed to connect the hosepipe up.

The boys of course had to be around the day that I fell backwards on to the glass cloches, breaking quite a few and collecting glass splinters in my rear - roars of laughter from the boys. Medical attention was needed, but it was not very serious. Nothing else very exciting to recall really happened down there, but the countryside was very beautiful and I enjoyed exploring the New Forest area as much as one could during Wartime.

In the December of 1945 I finished my Land Army days and came home to have my first son in the following June.

Audrey Byatt.