

## WOMEN'S LAND ARMY

At the start of the war there existed or were created different women's organisation which later were merged into the Women's Land Army.

**The Women's Defence Relief Corps (WDRC)** was formed on 9 September 1914 in order to relieve defenders, so women could undertake any work which could set a man free for the fighting line and secondarily to induce women to prepare for whatever might by coming by making themselves practical and efficient. Women undertook any work which set men free for the fighting lines and prepared for any eventuality.

The Women's Defence Relief Corps was formed in Britain under the support of Lord Horatio Herbert Kitchener (the British secretary of state for war).

The Corps was comprised of two divisions; the first being a 'Civil Section' which aimed to substitute women for men in factories so that men were able to stand up for military service.

The second being; a 'Semi-Military' section where women were trained in drilling, marching and the use of arms in order to be recruited for the armed services. The women were advised that in the case of an invasion by the enemy they would be responsible of defending themselves and their families at the home front.



It was non-political, non-sectarian and a democratic organisation which sent out groups of women to work at haymaking, harvesting, market-gardening and fruit picking. It was advertised as a 'free holiday' for women to work on the land and at its peak placed some five hundred, mainly Londoners, on the land.



**The Women's Legion** was formed in December 1914 and similarly created an agricultural section to further women's employment but it was concluded to be too expensive to run in comparison with the results achieved.

### Women's Legion in 1916

The Women's Legion was a British charitable organisation created in 1915 by Edith Vane-Tempest-Stewart, the Marchioness of Londonderry. Its first general secretary (to 1918) was Rose Bradley, daughter of George Granville Bradley, Dean of Westminster. It comprised volunteers who wore military-style uniforms and took on various duties

within agriculture, canteen, cookery and motor transport sections. More than 40,000 women joined its forces.

**National Political League** was formed in 1911 its main objective was to further social and political reforms on a non-party basis and it formed a Land Council shortly after the outbreak of war with an objective to help professional middle-class women and men especially disabled soldiers and sailors to find suitable work on the land. Although some two thousand women had registered since the outbreak of war it was perceived to be inefficient and of little practical value.

On 19th March 1913 the NPL organized a meeting to protest against forcible feeding at Kingsway Hall in London. It is claimed that over 1500 people attended this meeting. In 1917 the National Political League changed its name to the National Political Reform League.

**Women's Farm and Garden Union** was formed as early as 1899 looking after the interests of all professional workers in agriculture, horticulture and allied fields offering training courses and job placement. It ran more extensive training courses covering all forms of farm work and by September 1916 some two thousand women had been trained or had been directly placed as either experienced or untrained gang workers.

Membership was open to all connected in any way with the land, in farming, gardening and allied industries or those with a keen interest in these matters. Many of the founder members were professional women working in education, gardening, farming and small holdings. The Association set about establishing training courses and examinations, with an Employment Bureau offering a service for both employers and employees.

At the outbreak of the First World War a founder member Louisa Wilkins realised that there would be a shortage of labour on the land and the Women's National Land Service Corps was launched offering work placements to women, both rural and urban. This movement was so successful that it soon outgrew a small voluntary organisation and was taken up by the Government and the first Women's Land Army was born.

Between the wars there were difficult years of recession, and the Association worked hard to improve the working conditions and status of women in land work and to open up employment opportunities to qualified trainees. The first training scheme in practical skills was set up during the Second World War giving valuable service to those seeking to work on the land. A Garden Apprentice Scheme for school leavers was set – this led to the development of Government Youth Training Schemes. Throughout this time the Association exhibited at many agricultural and horticultural shows, promoting the need for training and giving out information and career guidance.



In 1993 the Association having identified a need for a training scheme for older students – as none existed elsewhere – established the 'Women Returners to Amenity Gardening Scheme'. Designed to offer 'returners' who were considering a career in horticulture, training in practical gardening skills, within private and public gardens throughout the United Kingdom.

**Women's National Land Service Corps** was formed in 1916 under the direction of Mrs. Louise Wilkins as an offshoot of The Women's Farm and Garden Union to deal with the problem of emergency war work as opposed to permanent employment using members both as organisers and labour units.

### **Labour shortages.**

At the start of the war, agricultural labourers were encouraged to sign up for the army by the rural elite. Landowners and parish priests, whose sons became the officers in many regiments, actively recruited those who worked the land or in the great gardens and houses of Britain. The loss of men from the land produced a labour shortage in the rural economy and attempts to encourage women to fill the gaps left by men were less successful than in urban areas. Many years prior to the war, women had been discouraged from working on the land both by the sensibilities of middle class (and increasingly, rural elite) opinion, and by the emerging rural trades unions which argued that female labour reduced the rates that men could be paid. Also, many industrial and service jobs in the towns and cities now available to women paid a far higher rate than agricultural labour and were much more rewarding and emancipating.

The Women's Land Army was created in January 1917 by Meriel Talbot on behalf of the Government with an aim to increase the supply of women workers on the land ensuring their efficiency and employment. Women tended to work in traditional female roles such as nurses, dressmakers and teachers whilst married women tended to stay at home. Thus the overall concept was somewhat 'out of the ordinary'

Following the 'appeal' in March 1917 at least two known Basildon girls enrolled in the Women's Land Army as part of the National Service Scheme.

### **Lynette Ashley**

Worked at Bluehouse Farm Laindon (no longer in existence) and the tenant at the time was Alfred John Markham who said of Lynette that 'there was more to Lynette than just her work output because she walked along with others each day who were billeted some distance away across fields to the work, which of course in the dark or winter months, was very unpleasant. It was said that Hurricane lamps could be seen approaching from all directions to the farm work

They started work at 4.30am generally eating their bread and jam breakfast whilst on the way. Her main task was that of herding the cows for milking then sending the milk by horse and cart at 'breakneck speed' to catch the 7.00am train to London.

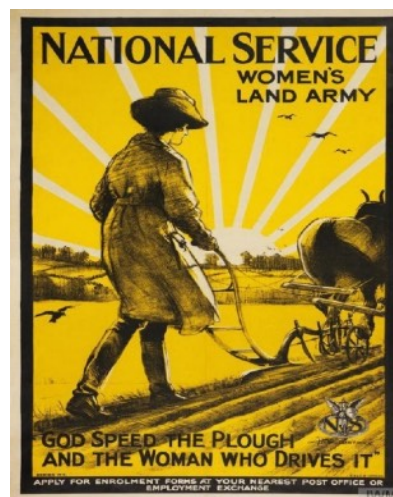
Lynette was also given the task of minding the herd in the summer months and she said 'I got to know the cow's gentle art of relaxing and chewing the cud as one by one they rested. I generally sat down too and was very soon stretched out fast asleep often awaking to find myself alone with no sign of the herd anywhere and panic set in.'

It was also unusual to have a day off, but she still found time to attend Sunday service at St. Nicholas Church to sing in the choir, occasionally dropping off to sleep during the sermon. During her time on the farm there was an article in the daily papers that 'the world was coming to an end.' This filled the girls with alarm and strangely enough on the morning in question it was very foggy, and they walked to work in stunned silence. We assumed there had been some kind of earthquake and we came across large shadows which on close-up were hedgerows which had caused us to walk in circles before arriving at our well-known stile.'

### **Alice Rosaline Stenning**

Alice was born in Surrey in 1896 and by the time of the 1911 Census was a Domestic Servant at Hall Farm Langdon Hills.

During the war she had enlisted as a Land Army girl also working at Blue House Farm and would have undoubtedly known and worked alongside Lynette Ashley.





She must have taken a liking to the farming environment because on 21 April 1919 at St. Nicholas Church she married George Edward Walker a dairy farmer and they lived and farmed out of Rose Farm Basildon. Both are buried in St. Nicholas

1919 Marriage solemnized in the Parish Church in the Parish of Laindon in the County of Essex								
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the Time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.	Rank or Profession of Father.
203	April 21 1919	George Edward Walker	27	Bachelor	Dairy Farmer	Laindon	George Walker	Dairy Farmer
		Alice Rosaline Stemming	22	Spinster		Laindon	Alfred Ernest Stemming	Storekeeper
Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church after solemnity by me, Herbert Carpenter								
This Marriage was solemnized between us, George Edward Walker, Alice Rosaline Stemming			in the Presence of us, A. Stemming, O. S. Jensen					

Churchyard.



## WOMENS LAND ARMY IN WW1

During World War One, 23,000 women were recruited to work full-time on the land, to help replace men who had left to fight in the war. (This form of National Service for young female civilian farm workers was misleadingly called the Women's Land Army.) Training usually lasted for about four weeks before girls moved into the work itself. The pay was 18 shillings weekly increasing to 20 shillings after passing an efficiency test.

There were three sections to the Women's Land Army:-

### 1. Agriculture

This encompassed many types of task including Milkers (approx. 40%) Field Workers (approx. 30%) Carters (approx. 10%) Market and Private Gardeners (approx. 7%) Ploughmen and Tractor Drivers (approx. 4%) Forewomen (approx. 2%) Shepherds, Bailiffs and other workers (approx. 7%)

**The main aim was to increase food production during the war.**

### 2. Forage (haymaking for food for horses)

The Forage Corps started in 1915, before becoming a section of the Women's Land Army, working in Great Britain and Ireland. The number of women who worked in this section are shown below:-

- March 1918 – 5,000 women workers
- At end of 1919 – 8,000.

### 3. Timber Cutting

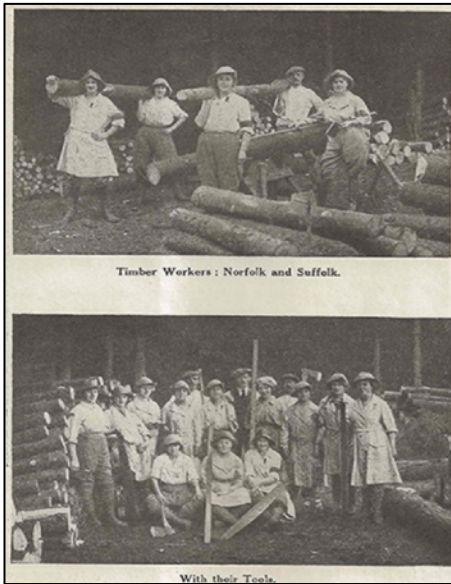
The foundations of the Women's Forestry Corps were laid in 1916, employing gangs of women, later becoming part of the Women's Land



Army and by January 1918 some 400 women worked as foresters.

**Photographs of Timber Corps in Norfolk.**

**Source: The Landswoman, February 1918, page 26.**



**Timeline**

In the spring of 1917 recruitment to the Women’s Land Army was the responsibility of the government’s National Service Ministry and by late March this training had begun.

In the August the Women’s Section of the Food Production Department of the Board of Agriculture took over recruitment but already some two thousand women had been placed on farms but equally from an initial response of nearly thirty thousand about half were rejected.

By the September of 1917 nearly two hundred and fifty ‘practice farms’ had been set up and by the end of the war some twenty-three thousand women successfully passed through training centres. These new full-time women workers were in addition to around three hundred thousand part time or seasonal women workers taking up agricultural work.

**Getting women interested ...**

Recruitment posters suggesting Britain was on the verge of starvation saying ‘Women of England! Wake up and answer your country’s urgent call for help’

Local Women’s Land Army rallies raised interest and showed members in their working uniforms. Would-be recruits were directed to their nearest Employment Exchange or to a local village registrar to volunteer.

**The Interview ...**

A local Selection Committee or Board, formed by members of the Women’s War Agricultural Committee in each county, questioned female applicants as to:

- Their health
- Physical capabilities
- Reasons for wishing to undertake land work

They had to be medically examined, free of cost. Women who had previous experience in agriculture and were not already in work, were given priority. Women over the age of 20 were also preferred.

The committees were also looking for women with a stable temperament, so that they could cope with possible loneliness on isolated farms. ‘A good constitution’ was also an important quality for an applicant – work on the land was hard graft!

**After the interview ...**

If recruits were prepared to sign on for twelve months, they could choose whether to work in either the Forage, Agricultural or Timber Cuttings sections.

If however, they were only prepared to sign on for six months they were 'appointed' to either the Agricultural or Timber Cutting sections. All recruits had to be willing to go wherever in the country they were required and were given free railway warrants for the journey.

Experienced women went straight into paid work on farms whilst inexperienced recruits attended organised training centres or 'practice farms' for that initial four-week period, later to become six weeks training. Successful trainees passing the 'efficiency tests' were found work on farms whilst those not successful were deemed 'unfit'

### **The Landswoman Magazine**

The Landswoman Magazine was the official monthly magazine of the Woman's Land Army and the Women's Institutes and was edited by Meriel Talbot who was in charge of the Women's Land Army during WW1. It was launched in January 1918 priced at 2d rising to 3d in May 1918 due to rising costs of paper and printing.

Compiled by Basildon Borough Heritage  
31 October 2024.