

MARGARET JEANNE CHESSUM nee PERRY: d.o.b. 4 May 1924

INTERVIEW #1

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus 4 June 2003 (Recording approx. 60 mins.)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army
22 March 1943 to 18 January 1949*

**Served on private farms, & with
 Bedfordshire War Agricultural
 Committee at Silsoe; trainer at
 Ravensden Training Hostel
 WLA 111613**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born in Paignton but left there in 1927 when her father died. Aged 3, returned to the family in Luton, so brought up in Bedfordshire. Was 15 yrs. when war started. Was due to leave school at 16. Was interested in doing outdoor work. Would have liked to do the 3-year horticulture course at Luton Hoo but it was fee-paying and her mother was a widow and couldn't afford it. (Estate took students who lived in a bothy. Lovely grounds and gardens. They showed at Chelsea Flower Show).

When she was 19 and was due to be 'called up' to war work she joined the Land Army and went to Luton Hoo for her 4-week training. (2 weeks in dairies, 2 weeks in the gardens). First post was in Eyeworth, living in a small cottage with an old lady who was very good to her but it was very primitive. Outdoor lavatory, tin bath in wash house. Water in a copper. Big farm (3 in 1) – 1200 acres, W.J. Kendall and son – there since WWI. Stayed for 18 months. Four land girls on farm, billeted in village: Mary Devell, Vera ___? (couldn't remember others). Mostly from Bedford. They'd been there for a couple of years already. They were OK. Then there was a girl from Yorkshire, Sheila Rennie. [Grandsons of farmer now running the farm and have extended it, 2003].

Mainly arable – hoeing, working with horses at first, then driving tractors, then a combined harvester. The second year she was there – a Massey-Harris combined-harvester arrive (the second one to come into the country, she thinks). Her husband-to-be drove it.

She got tired of living in an isolated village (more of a hamlet). Transferred – went into dairying – to Toddington – private farm belonging to a syndicate of businessmen. The man who was there was a conscientious objector – wasn't a happy man, not easy to be with. Not a happy experience. Another very young land girl there. Stayed about 2 months. Milked 40 Ayrshire cows – machine-milking (Alfa-Lovell).

Lived in farmhouse. Just a case of putting up with it. Winter. Snowy. Cold. Dark.

Left, after a few months, to get a tractor-driving job at Dunton (near to Eyeworth) working for the brother of the farmer she had first worked for. But reluctant to come back to area. Drove an Annis-Chalmers rocrop tractor. 2 other Land Girls on farm. Had a very nice billet in Dunton, near Biggleswade, for the summer.

Had done a correspondence course while in the Land Army, wanting to understand more about the years ("The Farmer's Year" was the textbook). When the scheme came up, nationally, for Land Girls to attend agricultural college, 2 places were on offer for Bedfordshire. She applied and got one, in Moulton Institute of Agriculture (September 1945-1946). 3 terms to cover the seasons. The full-time students were living in the Institute. The Land Girl students lived in billets in Wilbury Castle Women's Land Army hostel in Wellingborough.

Only 4 ex-servicemen on their course. The others were male students aged 18 or 19. The Land Girls were older and the only women. "They didn't know what to do with us." There were about 20 Land Girls – some from the North – she was friendly with a girl from Northumberland – one or two from the south – Devon.

Enjoyed the course. Went to Northampton (Moulton Institute) each morning for lectures and practical work in the afternoon or visits. (Shows photo of dairy demonstration). T.T. legislation (to reduce tuberculosis) was being introduced to develop TB-free dairy herds. Course was provided free and no obligation regarding work. They tried to provide work. She came back to Silsoe Hostel, and then took a driving course in Bedford arranged by Bedfordshire War Agricultural Executive Committee. Some girls at Silsoe Hostel worked regularly for private farms but used the hostel as their billet.

Lived longest at Ravensden training hostel. Max. 16 trainees. Carrie, in the kitchen, was a Land Girl but did the cooking. Remembers beetroot sandwiches being given for lunch. Miss Bremner was the Warden (previously of Milton Ernest). She was a bit moody, "but it wasn't much of a job was it?" She had a sitting room you could have a chat in. No assistant warden.

As a trainer, she had a room of her own, Betty and Maureen, the other trainers, had their own rooms. Those 3 plus warden were residents.

The girls were in two dormitories. She and the other 2 trainers, had to wake them up each day. Maureen Daley taught milking. Betty Davies assisted. Margaret taught arable farming skills. Jack Stewart (War Ag.) had the overseeing of Ravensden Farm. Post-war, Ravensden was the main Bedfordshire Women's Land Army training centre.

Started as a trainer in 1947. There for 18 months. One of the nicest jobs she had. Took the girls into Bedford on Thursday evenings and after lunch on Saturdays. Mostly she went home to Luton at weekends except when she was relief milker – hand milking.

Girls did 4 weeks of training. She had 8 girls doing field work and the milkers had 8. They had German prisoners of war at the time, and they were a bit of a problem. They “eyed the girls rather” and some girls were very willing. There was one particular girl who wouldn’t keep away; she used to disappear at times. “What they got up to at the farm was none of my business.” The Germans worked in gangs and worked harder. (The Italians “weren’t workers.” She came across them earlier in her private farm days.)

She came across a new lot of Land Girls every fortnight. Clifton Hostel was a quite large hostel, near Shefford, near the church. Hassells Hall Hostel, on the Everton Road, near Sandy, was requisitioned by the Army from the Pym family. Another was The Hollies hostel at Potton.

Margaret left the Women's Land Army when she was getting married. Met fiancé at first farm she worked on. Lived with John’s parents at first. Then they got a cottage, then moved into a farmhouse – lived there 35 years. Had 3 children. Did part-time secretarial work on farms and occasionally drove seasonal women workers to farms in a Bedford van.

Some very intelligent girls in Women's Land Army. All sorts of backgrounds. No hierarchy in the Land Army. Just employees. “We were free in the evenings.”

“I didn’t feel I was in the war – it was just my life.”

[Short break]

(Discuss photos of County office staff. Mrs. Eugster – very approachable. Mrs. Sharman – uniform officer. Major Corbett – finance).

Does not remember having any direct contact with the Bedfordshire War Agricultural Executive Committee officers. in Phoenix Chambers, Bedford.

Not part of the parade on 14 February 1946 when Princess Elizabeth came to Bedford. She was at Moulton Institute at the time. Was involved in recruiting – a recruiting afternoon in Northampton – went round in a van with a loud hailer, as a volunteer. Also had a stall on Northampton market square. This was 1947: “probably getting short of girls.”

Social life during the war – dances, the local “hop”, with piano and drum, at Dunton and Wrestlingworth. Wally Stratton played the piano. Americans at Bassingbourne. “They were always well-behaved as far as I knew. They liked to have fun.” More social life in the hostels. Went to the pictures – Regal and Empire (a “flea pit”) – in Biggleswade – by bike. Left bikes in a yard for one penny. No buses.

Whilst at Ravensden, Betty, Maureen and Margaret all went to the annual agricultural show in Fenlake, Bedford. Very muddy! They took cows down there for farmers to judge.

Food – porridge for breakfast. A packed lunch which they usually made themselves – cheese or beetroot. At the private billets they always kept chickens so they also had eggs. They had to give in ration books in the hostels. They always took own tea to work. “Farmers, in my experience, never provided anything,” Went home for a mid-day meal when working longer hours during harvest-time.

When at Ravensden, a trainer, the girls worked at Sharnbrook, Riseley, Melchbourne, Thurleigh, Poddington aerodrome and Tempsford aerodrome.

Never saw the “Land Girl” magazine. Did not see any county newsletters.

Uniform – wore dungarees; hardly wore the hat; but took it to Moulton Institute. Wore tie and armbands with half-diamond chevrons on her land army coat.

Appointed as a trainer without interview, no particular training. Mrs. Eugster would have recognized that she could be a leader.

Subsequently has not attended any re-unions. Did not know about them.

“We didn’t feel we were doing that much. We were doing a job.” She felt they just had to do the work. “Towards the end, we were just waiting for our life to start. Things were going to be so much better after the war” (Laughter)

They enjoyed the independence. She remembers cycling into London by herself, to stay with aunts in Westminster and Wimbledon; getting a lift part of the way on a lorry. Brought the bike back by train. Did not use her rail passes entitlement. 21st birthday around VE Day. Went into Luton to celebrate.

END OF INTERVIEW

Facts checked and updated with subsequently-documented corrections and amendments to content information (if any) in bold square brackets.

***Actual service may have commenced some time after enrolment date.**

For photographs and further information on Margaret Chessum nee Perry:

Stuart Antrobus *We wouldn't have missed it for the world: The Women's Land Army in Bedfordshire 1939-1950* (Book Castle Publishing, 2008)

pp 51,56, 100-103, 101

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army website: <http://tinyurl.com/2nq2up>

See *Roll Call* under 'P' for Perry, Margaret Jeanne

See also: *Land Girl Memoirs* webpage

See under *Oral Reminiscences* for an audio extract