

VERA BARNETT nee JOBLING

d.o.b. 22 September 1927

INTERVIEW #15

Interviewed by Stuart Antrobus. 23 April 2003 (Recording approx.30 minutes)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

11 August 1943 to 18 October 1947*

**Served at Bolnhurst & Cople Hostels
& post-war driver for Bedfordshire
Agricultural Executive Committee
WLA No.135018**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born Thornaby on Tees, Yorkshire. Lived there to 16 years. Worked in shop in Stockton on Tees and saw workmates in Land Army uniform. Joined **[lied about her age; only 15½ on entry]** and went by train to Bedford. Collected by lorries. Taken to Cople Hall hostel first. Matron, Mrs. Stone. a "dominant woman" (and her daughter). "She kept everybody in order. You daren't step out of line." Over 100 land girls there. From Doncaster, Sheffield, London, Bedford, Newcastle. They were the first intake **[Cople Hostel opened September 1943]**. (Elizabeth Day drove one of the lorries).

First job at Godbers, Willington, market garden. Grew tomatoes (and flowers – chrysanthemums). Jam, bread, cheese – horrible sandwiches. After a few months – appendicitis. In North Wing Hospital, Bedford for 3 weeks. Then home on paid sick leave. Back within a month.

She and "Sandy" (Kathleen) – been to "5 Bells" pub for a shandy. She and Sandy were blamed for coming back late and climbing in to the hostel, through a window and it was not them. Both got moved to other, separate hostels. She moved to Bolnhurst hostel (after about a year in Cople).

Bolnhurst just had oil lamps – nissen huts **[Not actual nissen huts, which had curved roofs; WLA hostel huts were Ministry of Works government huts designed for temporary labour accommodation]**. One girl, who married a Canadian, asked if she wanted her War. Ag. job (at the end of war) as a relief driver, visiting farms wherever work needed doing – harrowing, tractor driving. Was the only one who could drive a particular tractor, Farnell, which could drive a threshing machine. She enjoyed every minute of it. Wouldn't have missed it for anything.

Went to RAF dances at Little Staughton (Lancaster Squadron). American forces at Thurleigh and Chelveston also entertained them. Doughnuts, cigarettes. Called one of their halls "Spamerina" (SPAM - specially processed ham). You went out with one or two. They were gentlemen. (Shows postcard from one young American from New York.)

No training in farming. Later training in driving for War Ag. Betty Fuller suggested she drive. Mr Chandren was quite cross – they'd taken one of his best girls. Went to Bedford, to Ginn's Yard – 4 weeks, 2 hours a day. Six of them. Five passed. Police **[her friend, Ethel, said it was a War Ag man, John Day]** took them for driving test.

Drove all over Bedfordshire – Pottton, Biggleswade. Passed "Proficiency Test in General Farming" on a Biggleswade farm. Dot Carlisle - who stayed in Women's Land Army until the end – was given the piano from hostel. Kept in touch with loads of girls – Jeannette (New Zealand), Ruby (Canada), Amy (America), Peggy Shaw (Canada).

Made lots of life-long friends. Hedging Incident. Accident to foot needed stitches. Doctor called to hostel. Usually had to cycle to Kimbolton for a doctor.

Had fun. "Outdoor girl" make-up – lipstick, Ponds cream, "Californian poppy" perfume. Not sensible. Got sunburnt. Took blouse off. Rolled trouser up. "A bit brazen". Being in a crowd made us do what we did." Remembers looking round farm at pigs at Pottton.

Heard of accidents to girls. One killed on tractor? No training in safety. Dangerous machinery. Dressing corn with pink powder. Sugar beet. Mangel pulling. Worked with horses as well. Taking chaff? to barn, led horses. Feeding the "drum" – cut sheaves and fed into top of thresher.

Food quite good in hostel – spotless "Cook" and her daughter, Kathleen. Then they left and the food got terrible. Molly and another land girl took over. Previously, Miss Bajent (?) was Warden. Protest over semolina pudding.

One girl, Patricia Honour Pitts, was sent away. Cople. Letter on TOC H paper. May 1946, responding to Vera's letter. Ran away from Cople Hostel [Interviewer reads out letter contents] and a later letter, feeling better. She left because she was moved away from her boyfriend in Bolnhurst.

One girl, Pat Corner from Doncaster, left after a week. Didn't like land work. Joined WAAF. Cople was first-class accommodation. Bolnhurst was rough but very friendly.

Came in from the fields, threw off Wellington boots, rushed to try to get a bath. Bathed in twos to raise water level (from 5").

Been on a small-holding. Met husband in War Ag. One son is still here – 55.

Land girls keep her going – still see a lot of them.

END OF INTERVIEW

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 the enrolment date.**

For photographs and further information on Vera Barnett nee Jobling

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 130-132

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army website: <http://tinyurl.com/2nq2up>
See *Roll Call* under 'J' for Jobling, Vera