

ETHEL ELIZABETH WILDEY nee Sweenie.

d.o.b. 20 February 1927

INTERVIEW #16

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus. 23 April 2003 (Recording approx. 50 mins.)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

3 June 1943 – 28 February 1946*.

Served at Bolnhurst Hostel after transfer from Potters Bar

WLA No. 123840

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born in East Kilbride, Lanarkshire. A tiny village. Grandfather had a garage and filling station. Father was a mechanic. Family moved down to South of England in 1942, after a family "bust up". He was in the Ordnance Corp., but was transferred to Wimpey's Plant Depot, who were building airfields for American forces. He joined them after the war.

Lived in Barnes, with an aunt. Got friendly with girls in Land Army. Joined aged 16+ – one year before official entrance age [**Entered under-age. Claimed her year of birth was 1926**]. Was driving 3-ton lorries aged 17 years. Called to Potters Bar – tractor driving with different equipment – had spiked wheels and had to fit wooden 'shoes' to enable them to go on roads. 10 cwt. Hillman van and 3-ton lorry. (Driving test in Queen's Park area of Bedford.) Reversing through 5 bar gate entrances.

Found first few weeks difficult in hostel – all the others had been together for a good period, but made a friend, Peggy Deag [**of Dratton Road, Queens Park, Bedford**]. Family went back to Scotland when "doodlebugs" came over London.

Freddie Teare's farms in Potton, Beds. Not a kind person. He used to spy on them with binoculars. No toilet facilities. Not even a glass of water. Given one flask a year to take out in fields. If it broke, you did without. Her first hostel in Potters Bar was on the main Barnett Road. Large house – blue room, green room, yellow room, et cetera Transferred to huts at Bolnhurst, Bedfordshire.– 40 in bunk beds, concrete floor – five horrible oil lamps for light. 2 little coke stoves for heat.

Called at 6.30 but a driver had to get up earlier to fill up vehicle with fuel (drained overnight – no antifreeze). Breakfast: 'Porridge' + half a slice of toast and spoonful of butter. Apricot jam and cheese to make sandwiches for lunch. Stale bread – only 2 deliveries a week. Sometimes toasted them over a wood fire at lunchtime to make them more palatable.

Left after the war, when Dad was demobbed, because she missed home, but after a few weeks she wished she had never left.

Verucca outbreak in hostel. Chiropodist came out to hostel. Quite a few girls had it. It came from the sandy soil. While threshing barley – got barley husk stuck in the back of her eye. Had to go to hospital to have it removed.

Bolnhurst was the best social life of any hostel she came across. (She visited Sharnbrook, Kensworth House, Milton Ernest and Elstow – a week at a time.) Probably because they were far away from anyone else. Ted Burgess used to stoke the boiler every morning for hot water. At night – 2 baths and 5 wash hand basins – 40 young women. Everyone stripped off. Camaraderie was excellent.

Went as far south as Kensworth House hostel, near Dunstable. Elstow [**“Chimney Corner” hostel**], near munitions factory, some of it underground. You could feel vibrations at times.

Princess Elizabeth’s visit to Bedford 14 February 1946. Bolnhurst and Sharnbrook land army girls were taught by an army sergeant from Colmworth to march for the parade down Bedford High Street. Hilarious. .

Worked with both Germans and Italians P.O.W.s. The Germans were gentlemen and the Italians were absolutely horrible. Italians cheated by moving sticks marking out area for potato picking. Pioneer Corp used to guard and accompany German POWs from Colmworth Camp. “They were well fed compared with us.” Complaints about food – stale bread and awful potatoes.

Miss Bajent (?), warden. Had to be in by 10 p.m. Lights out at 10.30 p.m. Wireless run by accumulator, which frequently ‘ran out.’ Didn’t know about VE Day until flares went up at Thurleigh aerodrome. Drove the girls into Bedford for that night. “Everybody was happy.”

VJ Day – went to “The Wheatsheaf” at Colmworth, full of RAF men from Little Staughton. Vera and Ruby went up to London for celebration.

A male cousin of hers appeared out of the blue once, at a Little Staughton dance - gunner on a Lancaster aircraft. 3 times a week – Americans collected them and they served them and got lots of decent food.

Saw Glen Miller and his band at Corn Exchange and at Thurleigh base. (Reunion at same hangar in 1990s, when his nephew led the band.)

Bolnhurst – one of the friendliest hostels ever – you could have a laugh and a joke in the dining room and everyone would join in. If you went to other hostels there were little groups – no togetherness.

(Vera Barnett interjects) “You daren’t hang your undies out at night. The Americans would come and take them. You looked in their huts and there they were hanging up.”

American air force men were good to them. Brought fresh fruit. "They thought we were in a borstal because of our hard work and conditions." One American used to visit the hostel and wrote letters to his wife from there, asking the girls to add things.

(Post war work in Southall, London.)

Putnoe farm – Jack Hartnott (?). His mother let them work indoors when it rained. Loneliest work – "when on your own all day." Bert Johnson's farm.

Sexual ignorance. Mother said to her, "Don't you ever bring trouble back to this house" but the daughter had no idea what she meant (presumably referring to pregnancy). When Land Army uniform arrived she would dress up in it at 10 or 11 o'clock at night and walk up and down the road in it. Measurements taken at interview. (Beresford Road, Southall, to 'work in' shoes).

Everything was shared by the land girls. They were all short of money. 1 shilling an hour, pay. 24 shillings charged for the hostel. Everything else to pay for.

Return fare home – 10s/6d (52 ½ p)
TOC H club in Bedford. Met Father's cousin in WAAF uniform.

14 hours travel overnight to go home to Scotland by train (from Bletchley), once a year.

Never remembered any Bolnhurst girls going to convalescence or rest homes.

Long hours during summer, harvesting – working until 10 p.m. at night.

Exceptionally long hours at Potter's Bar. Dreadful conditions at Bolnhurst.

(Short break)

Layout of hostel – L-shaped Ablution block – 5 toilets, 5 wash-hand basins, 2 baths and deep sink for washing clothes.

Hall Way to Dining Room and Dormitory.

Dormitory.

4 people to a cubicle. A pair of double bunk beds. Dressing table in middle and wardrobe at end. Wooden box under bed for further clothes.

Through door at end of Dormitory to Forewomen's bedroom and room for Cook and daughter (opposite). Cook got up at 5.30 a.m. cooking on fuel and paraffin. Porridge made night before and heated up.

Table in dining room laid up with bread, apricot jam and cheese. Made own sandwiches. Tin box for sandwiches.

Once flask broken – did without. One a year. If clasp broke, you had trouble keeping food away from ants.

Running water. (None in village).

Boiler house. After 6 baths water ran cold. 5" water line.

Fun in ablution block! Songs, gimmicks. Never known togetherness like Bolnhurst. Threw caution to the wind. Very young. All smoked. In village store they knew everything – Hilda Whitmore, and villagers resented them invading the village. Resented noise and laughter. Upset their privacy. Didn't like it when they went to village dances.

At hostel – wind-up gramophone – had Americans over from Little Staughton to dance at hostel. Worked hard and played well. Saved coupons for civilian clothes. Women's Land Army office in Harpur Street – went to buy second hand items of uniform. You had to buy gaberdine breeches.

Temperance Alston – from Odell (Castle) - kept herself to herself. Very ladylike. Went to bed at 7 p.m. every night. She used all the best skin creams. Got up first in morning. She hung back in fields. Was older and only doing it because of conscription.

Joan used to make us laugh. Quite a few Bedford girls. Could go home every weekend and had no real expense for fares. They were lucky.

Diet restricted by very limited cooking facilities at Bolnhurst. Double-burner paraffin, near the kitchen hatch and another small stove.

Found yourself doing 'dirty' jobs – mucking out. Attempting to spread frozen dung. Laughed about it, while working hard.

Singing songs all day long and as soon as they got into lorry. "The Land Army - do or die!" Made own words to popular songs. "Don't turn away a Land Girl...She may be needed bye and bye. Every girl in the Land Army. She will do or die."

Land girl weddings.

Mabel Frost – older than most, 30s or 40. Tutt-tutted at some of the things girls did.

They were referred to as the "Bolnhurst Beauties." Used to steam their hats and preen themselves.

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 Ethel Wildey nee Sweeney:

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 134-137

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army website: <http://tinyurl.com/2nq2up>
See *Roll Call* under 'S' for Sweeney, Ethel Elizabeth
See under *Oral Reminiscences* for an audio extract