

**BETTY NICHOLS nee GRAY**

d.o.b. 7 December 1921

**INTERVIEW #18**

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus 28 April 2003 (Recording approx. 30 mins.)

**Bedfordshire Women's Land Army**

**February 1942 to 31 July 1948\*** Served at Milton Ernest Hostel & later  
on private farms in South Bedfordshire  
**WLA No. 59345**

**SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW**

**[Served from 1942, not 1941 as stated in interview]** Luton girl. 17 yrs old when Second World War started. Father said she'd got to go into the factory and work with him, at Kent's, Luton, making meters. She didn't want to work in a factory.

Since 8½ yrs., had spent summer holidays with her Aunt in Harlington in the countryside. Had always had lots of animals and liked gardening. Decided to join Land Army when she could.

Joined Women's Land Army (WLA) and was sent to Milton Ernest hostel. A friend, Jean Tomkins, who'd been at school with her, was also sent there. They paired up and shared a bunk area. Stayed there 14 months.

Didn't do any training first. First job was sorting rotting potatoes in a field. Found some good ones. 40 girls were sorted into 4 batches.

Went on to do hedging. Liked all of it. But on private farm, later, the farmer taught her a lot – she did ploughing, seed drilling, harrowing, tractor work, horses and milking. Transferred to a private farm, Manor Farm, Cardington for 2 ½ yrs. Travelled with Margaret Parr.

When Father found out that "something was going on" – the married farmer was having an affair with one of the Land Girls and she was expecting his baby – he insisted she leave.

Moved to live at home and work at Inions Farm, Cardington (belonged to Powderill's). Mr. Massey was the Manager.

Left home at 6.15am. cycled to farm for 7 am start, unless weather was bad. Snow in 1947 was unbelievable.

When at Milton Ernest – went threshing at Yelding, with Barbara, Terry and Rosa. Came out as far as Houghton Conquest farms. Thurleigh. Had her cycle for the last period – farmed at Bletsoe.

The Warden said who went where at the beginning of the week.

Preferred private farm work - enjoyed responsibility. Learned to drive tractors on a farm. Also worked with horses. Did hand milking. 20 cows at Inions Farm. 2 Land Girls had to do all the milking and care of the cows for 6 weeks, when the cowman damaged his knee-cap. Hard work but she enjoyed it.

End of June – hay time – Manor Farm – sharpened the cutter's knife with a file. Used to come home at 11 at night. Fortunately, it was downhill on the way home. On the way to work, she had to zigzag up Farley Hill.

She was the only permanent land girl at Manor Farm. Other girls were brought in as required, from Bolnhurst Hostel.

There were two of them at Inion's Farm.

Husband came from Toddington (and worked at Skefco ball-bearing factory, Luton). Met through a friend at the Fur and Feather Club, Luton – she bred rabbits. Bob and she got chatting. She'd never had a boyfriend – "I didn't do that". Eventually they went out together for 18 months and then got married. "He was a wonderful man – married for 42 years. He was very good ...nothing hassled him. The only thing that annoyed me at the time – my daughter could twist him round her little finger."

One job she didn't like was cleaning the calves' pen out after they'd been in there all winter. The smell was vile. It was layer upon layer. Had to load it on to a cart and tip it out at the other end.

The boss dealt with the pigs. She dealt with sheep. She stayed on until July 1948. Farmer like her helping with lambing because her hands were smaller.

Plucking and drawing poultry at Christmas time – made their fingers sore. They got covered with fleas from the poultry. Had to have a bath when she got home, so that she felt clean again.

Glad she went into Land Army. "I really enjoyed it."

Didn't have any really close friends. Moved from in the town to St. Mildred's Avenue in the Biscot area when she was 14 years old.

Started breeding rabbits from age of 11. Went on to specialise in chinchillas. Used to select ones for breeding and the others they had for dinner. Had skins tanned and made gloves from the others.

Became dressmaker when she first left school. Earned 6 shillings (30p) a week the first year and gave 5 shillings (25p) to her mother. Wages went up each year – 11s., then 16s., then 24s. The full Board of Trade rate was 30 shillings a week.

When she went into the Land Army and her money went up to £3 plus, she thought she was doing very well.

Her main friend at Milton Ernest was Elsie Howard from Dagenham. She used to bring her home to Luton at the weekend because Elsie didn't get to go home much. She made Elsie's wedding dress. Elsie became Betty's eldest boy's godmother but later became a Jehovah's Witness and the friendship ended.

Kept in touch with Mary Pakes, Jean and Terry. They and Kitty Hollock were in the dormitory cubicle together but Kitty moved to a private farm.

Americans invited them to dances at Thurleigh. Betty didn't go and when they had dances at Milton Ernest hostel she went into the kitchen and served tea: "I wasn't one to mix very much. I was very shy. I was a bit on the plump size and, I'm afraid, one place I worked at somebody used to make fun of me and it got to me". She did lose a lot of weight though, farming. She was fit and used to walk miles and miles. She used to walk up to 20 miles with a girl friend on Sundays.

She now wears a calliper (for 30 years) as a result of an accident when she slipped, and tore an ankle badly. It was strapped up for 6 months. Gradually it has got weaker.

Working clothes were washed by a laundry for the Land Girls but they had to wash their own clothes. She took hers home to Mum – one lot one week, another the other week.

14. Feb 1946 – she marched down the High St., Bedford, before Princess Elizabeth. Still has her WLA Proficiency badge in General Farm Work. Never saw "The Land Girl" magazine.

Uniform was alright. Has a pair of green trousers like officers' trousers. Never wore the hat, unless forced to. Didn't keep anything after leaving, except the smocks which she used about the house. Land Girls were allowed to buy second-hand items of uniform from the Bedford county office to supplement their own issue.

## **END OF INTERVIEW**

**Checked and updated with subsequently documented corrections and amendments to content information (if any) in bold \*Actual service may have commenced some time after the enrolment date.**

**For photographs and further information on Betty Nichols nee Gray**

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 98-999, 158, 160

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