

IRIS JOAN CORNELL nee MANNING d.o.b. 12 January 1924

Interview #2.

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus 19 September 2002 (Recording approx. 40 mins)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

14 July 1943 – 18 July 1950*

**Served on a private farm & then at
Hulcote Moors Hostel, Cranfield.
Trained at Toddington Park Hostel
Post-war driver for Bedfordshire
Agricultural Committee
WLA No.: 1302411**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born in Goldington, Bedford. Attended Goldington Green School then passed 11+ exam and went to Harpur Central School (now no more, but was next to Bedford Modern School: now the site of Harpur Shopping Centre).

Goldington was a separate village. She had two brothers, no sister. Country existence – walked, picked mushrooms and blackberries. Swam in the river at Goldington. Played whip and top, and skipping. Went to Putnoe Woods and Renhold Woods. Childhood freedom.

Aged 15, left school and worked in the office of Igranic engineering works. When 18 (1942) she was told she had to move out of the office and work in the factory on day and night shifts for the war effort. Tried it but decided to join the Women's Land Army because her friend, Jean Hartop, was already in.

After appearing before a tribunal she was allowed to join. Interviewed in Harpur Street office. Was asked, "Are you afraid of hard work?" she said, "I don't know. I haven't done any yet". They said they were very short of milking and dairy workers.

She was sent to Toddington Park Hostel for 3 months. The first morning, she sat on a stool to do hand milking. She was shaking so much with nerves that the bucket rattled, the cow kicked the bucket over and loads of cats appeared from nowhere to drink the milk. They were waiting for this to happen.

Milking procedures. Then worked on the farm for the rest of the day. Mother was on her own (Father had left them before the war); older brother in army. Young brother at home. Wanted to get somewhere near to home so that she could help out.

Got a job at Twinwoods Farm, Clapham. (Some farmers managed to get their daughters into Land Army, get a free uniform and have them back to work on their own farm, which the Government was anxious to avoid. She knew two locally.)

She cycled to Clapham. Had to be there for 6.30am. Mr. Sid Quenby said he could tell the time by her. She did milking, grinding the mangels.

Farm was immediately by Twinwoods Airfield (from where Glen Miller, American bandleader, flew to his death). She went where she was needed on the farm.

There were 2 other Land Girls on farm (one local from Clapham & one from Elstow).

Stayed for just over 2 years.

Deciding she wanted a change from a private farm, she then went to the Hulcote Moors Hostel, near Cranfield, in September 1945, but it closed in December '45 [**Actually closed: circa March 1947**]. The man who owned the Hulcote Moors farm wanted it back after the war ended, so they closed it.

Land Girls from there left. She got a job of driver for Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee. They had a depot at Goldington near the school (now the Roman Catholic Church). Men employed by the War Ag. ran dilapidated farms which had been taken over during the war. They would ring up and ask for equipment they needed on the farm and she would deliver it.

There were two men in charge, plus a couple of German prisoners of war, repairing machinery. She also drove a tractor to do ploughing or harrowing, as well. She'd learned to at Twinwood Airfield.

She was once sent Wellingborough way, had to hook up a full trailer, a fuel tank and a plough to one tractor. She had to trail these in the snow from Firedam (?) to Blunham, Bedford. It took all day long. You could only go at 6 miles per hour.

Tested on tractor, then taught to drive a Hillman van.

The older men didn't like the Land Girls much but didn't say anything.

Only saw WLA County HQ staff when she went in to collect any items of uniform. The uniform was a practical one: dungarees for working in and the breeches for "walking out" in.

When she worked for the War Ag., she met hostel girls working on various farms around the country.

Got on all right during her 4 months at Hulcote Moors Hostel.

Had to do harvest work and threshing, seasonally. Sometimes worked until 11pm, when harvesting during 'double summer time'.

Hulcote Moors Warden, a man (and his wife) – very nice. Dances at hostel – invited Cranfield airmen. Not keen on dancing so only went to a few American dances at Twinwood airfield.

Once had to relieve as milker at Turvey when a Land Girl was ill. Found fleas in the bed on the first night, at private billet, and so slept on the floor for the rest of the week. But most of the time in the Land Army she was able to live at home.

Never saw a copy of the 'Land Girl' or county newsletter.

Has read some Land Girl memoirs since. Has also attended numerous national re-unions since the first one in 1969 in the Royal Albert Hall. Now called the British Women's Land Army Society, it originally began life as LANRA (Land Army National Re-union Association). The Queen Mother (who as Queen Elizabeth was patron to the Land Army during the Second World War) agreed to be patron of the Society and used to send a letter to the conference every year. Attended last re-union, nationally, in 2001 **[12 May 2001, Grand Hotel, Birmingham]**. Regional meetings thereafter, as members get increasingly old (most aged early 80s)

(Discussion of photos and documents, including photo of Toddington Hostel and Bedford War Agricultural Committee depot, plus driving documents.)

Reflects on early documents sent at commencement of service.

After leaving the Land Army, she continued doing office work for the War Ag in the office. Bedfordshire War Agricultural Committee's agricultural machinery depot closed: 28 December 1951.

Regret at members of Women's Land Army not being allowed to take part in the annual Remembrance Sunday march past the Cenotaph in London, until the year 2000.

[Short break]

More discussion of photographs.

"I'm glad I did it. It taught me a lot." [Regarding her WLA service]

Incident at Twinwoods Airfield. She accidentally drove a tractor on to the runway when a Mosquito fighter plane was about to land. Was called before the Air Commander to be told off.

14 Feb. 1946. Marched down the High Street in the Bedfordshire Women's Land Army parade **[approximately 600 young women]** in Bedford before Princess Elizabeth and then assembled in the Corn Exchange.

Remembers attending Sunday evening concerts for the Forces the Corn Exchange, Bedford.

Girls from a Kent school evacuated to Goldington.

END OF INTERVIEW (See overleaf)

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 the enrolment date.

For photographs and further information on Iris Joan Cornell nee Manning:

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 38, 86-87

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

See *Roll Call* under 'M' for Manning, Iris Joan

See also *Recent Land Girls News* web pages re
"Tea at the Palace, 21 October 2009"