

MARY SPILLING nee BENNETT

d.o.b. 06 January 1922

Interview #3

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus 13 February 2003 (Recording approx. 60 mins)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

3 March 1942 to 17 May 1947*

Served on private farms

WLA No: 69419

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born in Fulham, London. Came to Bedford when she was 10 (1932). Father – a consulting engineer - was Manager of Eastwoods brickyards. Eventually, Sir Raymond Erith of Bedford Brick & Co. asked him to build a new brick factory. They went to Marston Vale to try the clay there but it wasn't quite suitable. So they moved to Kempston Hardwick and bored the clay there, right by the railway line and he built the brickyards. He designed it all. It always used to be called Bennett's brickyard but, of course, he had no money in it.

After 3 years, London Brick Co., Stewartby, bought it. One of the shunting engines in the brickyards was named "Ruth" after her sister. He started with the bungalow for the offices and then he built it. He was very well liked because he paid more than anywhere else and because he was interested in them, the men.

When Stewartby took over, he was told he had to sack these men. He said, "No way, those men helped me build it. I cannot stand by and sack them." The family later moved to Essex.

The war started and he worked for the Ministry of Supply, commandeering engines for munitions work.

There were 7 girls and 2 boys in the family but the first child died in her mother's arms. The eldest sister Nelly was the only one who didn't have biblical names. Next was John who went on to be a draughtsman in the brickworks office. Peter became a fitter there. Then there was Ruth, Mary, Hannah, Esther and Rhoda.

Ruth joined the Women's Land Army and delivered milk in the Biggleswade area. Mary joined the Women's Land Army second, then Hannah, who looked after poultry. **[Photo of all three girls together in Land Army uniform in the book, p12 and online. See end notes].**

Ruth joined the Land Army because her nerves got shattered by the bombing in Essex. Family returned to Bedford. (Mary worked for Cryselco first).

Mary joined when she was 20. She remembers telegrams arriving for her 21st birthday, when she was working on the farm in Great Barford. **[Billeted in Mill House, Great Barford].**

First job on the farm was walking a horse. The horse trod on her foot and she shouted, "Whoa" so it stopped with its hoof on her foot. Fortunately there was a Foreman around. This was her first experience of horses.

There were 3 working horses: Phoenix, Gypsy and Festus.

"They sent me to collect Gypsy from a field. I had Wellingtons on. I sat on this horse, no saddle, the workers hit its backside and he headed off down a hill to the road. I didn't know how to ride but I managed it. That was the first and only time on a horse."

"I had to connect a hoe behind it to hoe a bean field."

Eventually she worked all the horses. Phoenix had a tendency to rear. The clanking of the lever on the rake started him off. She had to talk quietly to calm him down.

Then she went stooking. She used to collect the sheaves and stack them up in a row then someone with a tractor and trailer collected them and a rick was made in the farmyard.

Finishing off the hay rick. She was the only permanent land girl there.

Other Land Girls came from War Ag. hostels for threshing. There were two men working the horses, a reserved occupation. "They warned me not to milk because weekend would never be my own."

Started at 7 a.m. Called cows in for milking. After milking – hand milking with 2 others. Then cooled the milk. Cows went out. When it was light she went out on the Ford tractor, ploughing. Used to sing "One Fine Day" from the Madam Butterfly opera.

Harold Brown, the gentleman farmer, didn't like it when he had to pay overtime.

Hoeing, thinning out. Cutting down brussels.

She moved to Kempston – Moorings Farm. Peas, potatoes.

She suffered from a disease of the gums, gingivitis, and her dentist was in Kempston, so she requested the move so that his treatment of her condition would be possible.

The daughter of the musical arranger of “Tuesday Night is Music Night” on the BBC, came from Finchley, as another land girl on the Great Barford farm.

Twice she paraded the prize cow, Genny IX **[Photo in book, p.88, and online. See end notes]** – Farm Sunday & D-Day Parade. “Outside E.P. Rose’s department store – with the American band behind us, the cow relieved herself.”

Invited to Thurleigh air field but she had a fiance, Jim, so she played “ping-pong.”

The Land Girls gathered in the pub by the river in Great Barford. An American journalist was there once, writing down what they were saying that they had been doing.

Other sisters in the Land Army: Hannah was in Pavenham; Ruth in Biggleswade, delivering milk.

[Short break]

Winter in Kempston, Mooring’s Farm. Made a snow plough for the Army Convalescence Camp in Clapham.

Lost her engagement ring when the horse pulled the harrows rake suddenly. Never found it.

Friend took her to a hotel in Cornwall after the war to help her recover from the death of her fiancé.

A Land Girl from East Finchley. Her father had his girl removed because he didn’t like not knowing what she was getting up to.

Started smoking. The boys smoked Julianne roll-your-own cigarettes. Moved on to Woodbines, then Senior Service.

Billet in village. Freddie Southill and his wife. Top of the hill. Another Land Girl staying there.

Then changed billet to Addingtons Road, Mr. & Mrs Marblin.

She thinks people thought the world of Land Girls – she heard people saying, “They do a grand job.”

(Photo of her with the best milking cow in Bedfordshire in D-Day Parade in Bedford. New Land Girl from Finchley, London accompanies her).

Was bridesmaid at her sister’s wedding in Great Barford Church, all dressed in white.

Local social events in villages: the pub and dances in Wilden.

Isolation of “private farm” Land Girls. Never got to see “The Land Girl” magazine.

Didn't get to hear, after the end of the Land Army, about any re-unions.

Father was converted to Christianity, in London. Fellow-believers came round to their house and sang hymns. They had an organ. From then on, all his children were given biblical names.

Had a happy family life. No worries during war.

Even today, biblical quotes help her cope with life. She prays at night.

Really liked being in the Women's Land Army.

(Look together at arm-band with chevrons, photos, release certificate 3 May 1947 – after 5 years service).

END OF INTERVIEW

Facts checked and updated with subsequently-documented corrections and additional information to interview content, if any, in bold square brackets. *Actual service may have commenced some time after the enrolment date.

For photographs and further information on Mary Spilling nee Bennett:
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 12, 87-90

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