

ELIZABETH 'Liz' Mary Blair DAY BEM (unmarried)

d.o.b. 26 April 1913

INTERVIEW #5

Interviewer: Stuart Antrobus 14 February 2003 (Recording approx. 60 mins)

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

9 November 1940 – 30 November 1950*

**Served on private farms & at
Cople Hostel . Forewoman.
WLA No. 36558**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

[Incorrect dates for WLA service given orally on recording. Correct dates from Imperial War Museum records given above]

“Most people call me Liz... I shall be 90 this coming April.” Born on Dungee Farm, Odell, Bedfordshire (family farm). “Harold was our parish.”

Educated by a lady who set up a little (private) school in Harold “and to lick me into shape I was sent to the Friends (Quaker) School in Saffron Walden.” [She is not a Quaker but had great sympathy with them]. Missed the farm animals – horses mostly. Was there 10 years old to 15 years old. Moved to Convent school in Bedford for a year.

From 16 years, went to Garner’s Dairy Farm in Spring Road, Kempston and then to do market gardening.

She joined the Women's Land Army (signed up 5 August 1940). There were a few girls like her with country backgrounds. Went to Northampton private farm first but did not like it much, so got a move to Godber’s farm at Willington – there about 3 or 4 years there. 2 or 3 other land girls there. 2 or 3 older men there, responsible for greenhouses. Picked tomatoes.

She was used to farm horses. Her family bred them on. “During the First World War you could get a £100 for a horse but after the war you were lucky if you got £10.”

Second World War – tractors were coming in – she could drive but preferred horses. Isaac Godber’s farm (daughter Joyce Godber became the Bedfordshire historian). They had 2 horses: Tommy and Pam.

She was mostly up at the nursery – where the garden centre is today. One other land girl from Luton, one from Bedford and one from near Birmingham. New to farming. Very good billets in village. Liz lived with Mrs Spabbins in Station Road. She had a husband and two daughters: one was a porter at the railway station and on worked at Cardington on barrage balloon production.

"I plodded along and did my job. I was used to the work and used to the weather. Those poor girls who had been hairdressers and allsorts, coming from the north....I remember collecting these girls from Cople (Hostel) for potato picking and I did feel sorry for them, bending down, and the weather too ...I think they did well, very well."

Visit of Princess Elizabeth to Bedford to take the salute at the march past of the Bedfordshire Women's Land Army 14 February 1946. Liz was there, driving a tractor.

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army County Office – staff (discuss photo in souvenir programme of Rally and Exhibition: 3-day celebration 14-16 February 1946). Violet Sharman, Rachel Digby, Betty Fuller (who visited hostels).

Discuss visit by HRH Duchess of Gloucester to Cople WLA Hostel, March 1944 **[9 February 1944]**. Liz, as forewoman (with 4 years service), presented her with a gift of tomatoes and eggs decorated with a huge bunch of snowdrops and aconites, picked from the Hostel garden. Mrs. Stone, Warden. (Quote from brochure) "The departure of Her Royal Highness was the signal for another rousing cheer from the girls who waved their thermos flasks and sandwich tins as the royal car made its way down the drive... Within half-an-hour the girls were all back at work..."

She did not know she was going to do the presentation. Her fellow land girls said, "For goodness sake speak up. We can never hear what anybody says." "I really did. I said, 'Your Royal Highness...' at the top of my voice!"

The girls from the north did not care for the girls from the south at first but when they got used to each other. "They were some of the best... They said we spoke 'too posh' like the BBC..."

Land Army hats "...they wore them (at) all sorts of angles."

Liz was made a forewoman – got gangs of girls and looked after them. She had a gang of High School girls, during the term, for a while. 7 acres of outdoor tomatoes to look after. Miss Westaway, Headmistress, was not going to let these girls work near men and near bad language. She sometimes came out in her car to keep an eye on them.

Quite a lot of women from the town did seasonal work.

Course at Ravensden training hostel – Liz was invited to do in-service training as a part-time tutor. Visit to sugar beet factory in Peterborough.

She was also given the job of going round every hostel in the county to encourage Land Girls to grow their own vegetables. "It was very good where a

house was taken over and a gardener left – he knew what to do. But it was a job to make him realize it was tons of cabbages you wanted, not a nice bed of asparagus.”

At the other hostels – Milton Ernest and Leighton Buzzard (“a lovely bit of ground there”) – you could not get the labour. You could not get girls to work in the garden. Sometimes if a girl was not very well, the doctor would say, “Give her light jobs in the garden.” Well... (Laughter).

Most pleasant hostels: Cople, Silsoe country houses. **[Varied from country houses to huts]**. Elstow – did not have a garden; other huts were taken over.

Had a lot to do with Mr. Randall (Horticultural Officer, War Ag.).

In winter – fruit trees (“Lousy job – monotonous – spraying.”)

July 1947 Proficiency tests (gained 4 of 5 distinctions). Had not done milking for years, when she took the milking test.

Milking – “scraped through” – did not have any recent experience.

Did correspondence course: completed “Elements of Agriculture”, Ministry of Agriculture, 29 June 1944. Very interesting. Conducted by the College of Estate Management.

Envelope marked, “Prime Minister” to inform her that she was to be given BEM.

When notified that she was to receive an award she did not have to say anything for 3 weeks and she was staying in a hostel.

Letter from Buckingham Palace – unable to present the British Empire Medal personally – sent it in post. Signed “George Rex.”

“I was tickled pink getting a letter from “George.”

Has never worn it for any special occasion.

[Georgina Gray, another Bedfordshire Women's Land Army girl was awarded BEM].

She was at Swanley (Kent Horticultural Institute) 9 October 1947 to 27 August 1948 doing a course in horticulture at the end of the war for ex-servicemen and land girls. They got paid wages and her fees were paid.

(Short break).

(Discuss event programmes)

Friday 15 February 1946. Bedfordshire Women's Land Army Concert given at the Corn Exchange, Bedford, 8p.m. Introduced by Trevor Howard (British film actor). Included Cople Hostel Chorus and many other hostel land girls took part in sketches, songs, dancing and PE displays, musical items.

Comments on some of the hostels:

Kensworth Hostel – between Dunstable and Luton.

Bolnhurst Hostel – was not open very long.

Potton – small private house.

Saturday 16 February 1946. WLA Dance. Music by '101' Military Convalescent Depot Dance Band (Clapham, Bedford).

14-16 February 1946. Exhibition of Agricultural Works and Handicrafts (opened 3.15p.m. 14 February by Princess Elizabeth), plus presentation of awards to land girls for long service. (Broadcast to the crowd in St. Paul's Square).

Film show (continuous daily) in Lower Hall, Corn Exchange, of Ministry of Information films, free, including, "The Land Girl."

Upstairs on the balcony, an exhibition from Luton Museum of Old Farming Implements. They had to call on Liz's father to identify some of them.

Liz drove a tractor in the parade by the High Street.

Discuss letter to Liz, (at 14 Spencer Road, Bedford), from WLA County Office 26 July 1947. "Congratulations on excellent results in all 3 proficiency tests: Distinction.

96% Outdoor Garden and Glasshouse Work

93% General Farmwork

100% Market Garden and Fieldwork

"I think this augurs well for your coming course at Swanley. I shall only be satisfied if you return with a diploma." (Signed Mrs. I. Eugster, County Secretary). She did not do very well in her milking. "The cow wouldn't let it down. I hadn't milked in such a long time."

Wide driving experience. Took part with horses from Godber's in Farm Sundays, annually, in Russell Park, Bedford.

"The land girls made very good dairy people – very good indeed."

Looking at photo of Mary Bennet, Bedfordshire private farm land girl with a prize cow, parading in Bedford during the war. Liz recognised the breed: "It's a dairy Shorthorn. You didn't see any of them black and white cows... the Friesians

Social life: "You made your own. ... Those of us at Willington and Great Barford, we used to meet at the Anchor (pub) on Friday night."

BBC Music Department was resident in Bedford during the war. "I used to cycle in to symphony concerts and hoped the "Jerry" (German planes) didn't come over... Sir Adrian Boult and Malcolm Sargent. I remember his conducting "The Wasps" (Vaughan Williams). He looked so nice – he was a dapper man – a very thin waist – I remember looking at him and thinking of wasps."

Working for County War Agricultural Committee. – got a Hillman truck to travel round hostels in county. "On looking back, it's the Land Army (women) that knew about farming years ago... There's very few people that know anything about it."

After the war, stopped on. After Swanley, briefly worked with gangs doing experimental work with Unilever at Colmworth. "I got to know that the Physical Education College in Bedford were wanting somebody on their grounds. I played games – hockey and cricket – I thought that would be nice. At one time the Land Army wouldn't contemplate that – it was a light job that would suit me." She went up as a Land Girl. In the interview she said, "I'm only used to grass as cattle fodder but I do know what I like to play on." She got the job. She learned from the groundsman, Will Rogers, at the High School, Bedford.

She stayed on for 30 years. The Land Army finished **[30 Nov. 1950]**, and she left, after 9 years service **[actually, 10 years service]**.

She got "mickey" taken by fellow Land Girls when they heard, at Swanley Hostel, Kent, that she had been awarded the BEM. They wrote "NBG" on the dormitory, in jest ("No Bloody Good"). Youngest brother said, "Well what does that make us?"

Discuss newspaper cutting: Bedfordshire Times 18 November 1949. "County Office closes but history has been made. Patriotic work recalled." Liz went quite a bit to the County Office when she was responsible for hostel garden and she did not have much to do. During the bad winter 1947, she used to take girls with 'nits' (head lice) into the cleansing station.

Bedfordshire Times 27 January 1943. Hostel at Kensworth House "a delightful chalet-like building" off the A5.

Women's Land Army clubs? She could not remember them.

"Staying on the land" booklet. Ministry of Agriculture, November 1950. Encouraging Land Girls to stay on in agriculture. "The men didn't want those sorts of jobs after the army; they wanted collar and tie jobs."

The War Ag. taught Land Girls to drive.

Social activities, e.g.: May festivities 1944 at Elstow – gymkhanas – “very popular.”

War Ag. – Ginn’s Yard lorry depot (behind High Street, near car park).

Then it changed to another site.

Remembers seeing “The Land Girl” magazine.

Received congratulatory certificate from Queen Elizabeth

Proficiency certificates signed by Inez Jenkins (who took over from Lady Denman when she resigned as Director in February 1945).

Land Army armband – yellow background, dark green centre, red half-diamonds, extra green and yellow half-diamond pinned on. (Was entitled to 10 yr. armband)

She did have her land army socks for a long while afterwards.

Enjoyed her years working at the college.

During war - pest control very important – keeping rats down.

Women milk recorders – for government.

END OF INTERVIEW

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

For photographs and further information on Elizabeth ‘Liz’ Day:

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 23, 24, 55, 56, 71, 77, 82-83, 90, 172-176, 234, 235, 235

Bedfordshire Women’s Land Army website: <http://tinyurl.com/2nq2up>
See *Roll Call* under ‘D’ for Day, Elizabeth Mary Blair