

HANNAH CROOT nee BENNETT d.o.b. 21 October 1924

INTERVIEW #6

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

Bedfordshire Women's Land Army

7 September 1942 – 7 May 1949*

**Served on private farms
WLA 89769**

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW

Born in Fulham, London. Large family. All have biblical names, except the first one. Father became a Christian. She became a Christian when she was 24. Baptised by immersion (adult baptism).

Father was a consulting engineer. Designed and built the brickyards at Kempston Hardwick. He was a Manager at Eastwoods, when Sir Raymond Erith asked him to build a new brickworks for Bedford Brick (site later became known as Coronation Brickyard when taken over by London Brick Co. It was he who named the public house on the A6 in Kempston Hardwick "Chimney Corner". Some people called the works, Bennett's brickyards.

She was 7 when the family (2 boys & 5 girls) left London. She and two sisters visited the brickyards and, when it was quiet, had a ride on the bogeys [trucks on rails].

He then moved on to village called Hutton in Essex but the Second World War started and he got a job with the Ministry of Supply in London. Mary and Hannah worked in shops - Mary in a toy shop; Hannah in a hairdresser's. Ruth, the older girl, in London, was more aware of the dangers of German bombing and strafing (firing machine guns at civilians from low-flying aeroplanes).

Attended Brentwood Girls School. Left school at 14 but didn't start work until 15, when the war started in 1939. Family moved back to Bedford after 3 years in Essex, to avoid German bombing. Worked in Perkin's, a grocers shop – did firewatching at night during the war. Then moved to Woolworth's (much to her parent's disapproval - fire watched on roof. Memories of wartime Bedford. War Ag. lorries. Boots girls – assistants – included Rhoda. Esther looked after children at St. John's nursery.

Nearly 18. Went into Land Army. Volunteered before she was conscripted. Placed in Felmersham at Mr. Hensman's Manor Farm. Mrs. Hensman said she couldn't be called Hannah – workers would drop the 'H', so she must be called Anne.

Slept in servant's quarters. Dislocated her toe. No electric or running water. Water pumped into tank in roof from a well. A copper or producing hot water. Oil lamps. Jug and bowl in bedroom.

Good food. Egg and bacon and fried bread every morning, after she had finished milking (6-7am). Farm workers made her a cup of tea. 5 cows to milk. Horseman helped at weekends to enable her to have every other weekend off. 3, then 4 horses. Poultry.

She had a near-accident with a horse backing into the river, nearly. Heavy harness to put on horses. Several times she took 3 horses to Odell to be shod. Sat on one horse and led the others.

Harvesting during double-summer time, up to 10 o'clock at night.

Sent to Mr. Brown's farm at Great Barford (where sister, Mary, was) for initial training but it was harvest time at the time – making shooks or 'stooking'. Every muscle ached.

Some hostel Land Girls did threshing on her Felmersham farm. She went once to the Milton Ernest Hostel for an entertainment. Got friendly with a girl in the village and a farmer's daughter – three-some went to village 'hop' (dance) in Sharnbrook. Was stopped one night by a local policeman because her bicycle lamp was too bright (breaking 'blackout' regulations) and fined.

Met some Americans servicemen, stationed at Sharnbrook, but preferred played rounders on the village green with local boys when she was 18.

Her friend's father was Head Gardener at Sir Richard Well's place in Oakley and had nectarines and other wonderful food on the farm.

Looked after two pigs. Shooting parties at Mr. Hemsworth's at Felmersham.

Attended forces dances in Bedford and borrowed her two sisters' Land Army coats to get her two friends in cheap.

RAF Shortstown held ballroom dances. Buses every ten minutes from Bedford. No trouble with men. Went out with British soldiers and sailors and occasional Americans.

(Short break)

Stayed in a farmhouse billet with the family called Hensman. Sister Mary's fiancé died on active service (direct hit on his tank). Worked at Felmersham for about 2 ½ yrs. She wanted to go home. Moved to Kempston to look after poultry and lived at home (on condition she helped with the housework). Sisters – Mary, Esther, Rhoda – and she were at home. Both boys had married. John was in army; the other brother, Peter, was a toolmaker at the brickworks.

Mother – plump; Dad – thin. Dad wanted to start a new life in Australia and went out there to try it out but Mother wasn't persuaded. Father had a stroke and died four years' later.

Mother had a woman to help in the house and father had a gardener to tend to the garden of the large Manager's house, belonging to the brickworks. Huge moated house – built with Askern bricks – called Askern House. Large oak dining table – girls played table tennis on it when parents out – let boys in through French window. Father had a Lincoln Zephyr car.

Walked on top of the brick kilns where her Father worked and watched the chambers being bricked up.

Mr. Stratford at Box End Farm – a bit devious and 'one for the girls'. She wasn't having any of it. She was worried also about the fact that he was breaking the wartime rules about corn for hens. He said that she should take the blame if they were caught and he'd pay her – she'd get off lightly.

She also disliked the fact that she had to wring the necks of chicks that were poorly. She got thinner with worry.

Raising chickens in incubators. Italian prisoners of war sometimes plucked hens when they hadn't been properly killed. Only there for 18 months.

Moved to College Farm, Oakley – Saunder's. She went out with Graham, one of the sons (the others were Arthur "Bob" & Jack at Cople). Horticultural work there – she loved it. Strawberries, asparagus, peas, turnip, cabbages, cauliflowers, brussel sprouts. Men did piece work there. Ex-RAF officer was invalided out of the force to work there to learn the business. Helen Day – Liz Day's sister – used to drive a lorry delivering potatoes, to places such as the Granada cinema restaurant in Bedford.

Had to carry 1 cwt (hundredweight) bags. She was called "Miss Bennett" at that farm.

Remembers boys collecting moorhen's eggs, using a punt along the river at Felmersham. Mrs. Bishop used to cook big pan full of them.

At the end of the war, she met Fred (demobbed from RAF) who worked at the farm and married him. Had a honeymoon in Jersey. He saved his gratuity and saved hard from his earnings and they eventually had a house built.

(Friends from church are taking her to the south of France - she's never had a passport and been abroad before, at time of interview.)

Father – John Harry Bennett – manager of Eastwoods Flettons brick works, then Bedford Brick, owned by Sir Raymond Erith.

Mother stayed with Hannah at Oakley after her Father died. She died aged 84 years.

Husband, aged 60, moved to Unilever at Colworth, Sharnbrook, working on crop science experiments on vegetables for freezing. He was kept on part-time, after retirement age.

Glad she went in the Land Army. She took part in the parade down the High street, Bedford, when her sister, Mary, led the prize dairy cow in a parade.

In 1946 Princess Elizabeth took the salute at the march-past. The land girls were looking to see if the Princess had nylons on. She did.

When VE and VJ days came, the farmer asked her to shut the chickens up so that he could attend celebrations in London.

Continued in Land Army to 1949 (6 yrs 8 months service). Remembers Mrs. Sharman and Mrs. Truman, from the County Office, chaperoning them when they attended dances at Little Staughton air base during the war.

END OF INTERVIEW.

Facts checked and updated, as far as possible, with subsequently-documented corrections and amendments to content information, where known, put in bold in square brackets. *Actual service may have commenced some time after the enrolment date.

For photographs and further information on Hannah Croot 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, 90-92

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