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## Land Army

Last updated: 11 April 2008

In April 2008 Elsie Gwynne from Yorkshire, Irene Gwynne from London and Phyllis Davies from Talgarth, told us about their experiences as Land Girls in Radnorshire and Brecknockshire.



Read about the Land Girls' memories and listen to how they describe the Land Army:



**Why did these girls want to join up and what did they do?**



**What did people think of the Land Girls and how important was their experience?**



**Elsie describes arriving in Mid Wales in 1942...**



**Phyllis tells us about the work...**



**Irene looks back at the experience with hindsight...**

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## Land Army

Last updated: 09 April 2008

The Land Army was a vital part of the British war effort and carried on long after the war finished. In April 2008 Elsie Gwynne, Irene Gwynne and Phyllis Davies told us about their experiences as Land Girls in Radnorshire and Brecknockshire:



### Where did you live before joining the Land Army?

**Phyllis:** I lived over there (points) just under the Black Mountains.

**Elsie:** I grew up in Yorkshire and joined the Land Army in 1942. I had been working in a shop and one Monday morning I was cleaning the windows when I saw a girl in the Land Army uniform and I thought I'd like that...and I joined up!

**Irene:** I was in London and worked for Picture Post for Farmer's Weekly with my mother. I was 17 and she didn't want me to go. I had to go to a tribunal because they argued it was a reserved profession but my mother gave up when I threatened to join the air force as soon as I was 17 and a half!

**Elsie:** I was 19 and my mother wanted me to join the Navy instead. In my examination my mother kept answering the questions, saying I'd be too scared to do anything. Mothers had to come into the exams with us.

**Irene:** My mother told them I'd run away if I saw a cow! Mother's were the ones then, if they said no that would be it.

**Phyllis:** I was 19. My mum didn't want me to go but I was working in a private house so I had to go...

### Why did you want to join the Land Army, especially if your mothers were so against it?

**Irene:** I had had enough of London and wanted to get away and do something else.

**Elsie:** Well, and the war was on and I wanted to do something patriotic.

**Irene:** Really? Well, yes, when you were in the uniform you did feel patriotic.

### Where did you get sent first?

**Elsie:** They asked where I wanted to go and I said Devon because I had relatives there. My mother really didn't want me to go to Wales, she said it was a foreign country, there had been some scandal in Abergavenny and she was worried if I went near that area!

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**Irene:** I went to work in Middlesex first, at a market garden there but I wanted to move on.

**Phyllis:** I started on a farm in Talybont selling milk and staying with the workman and his wife. Each morning we would take the milk around. It was okay but I wanted to move too.

**Irene:** I was sent to Glasbury (which we thought was pronounced glass bury!) and I remember changing trains at Hereford and then when we got to the station at Glasbury there was a truck to meet us but it had broken down and we had to push it to the hostel! It was quite a shock and I had told myself I would give it two weeks, but we arrived at the hostel which was at Maswllch Castle which was covered in red ivy and was lovely...and I ended up staying for the three years until the hostel closed.

My bedroom was over the ballroom which was beautiful. And there was a beautiful staircase, when you came down you felt like a film star! We got one girl who got married there to come down those stairs in her wedding dress!

I started in the market garden and then transferred to machinery, doing threshing, planting and hoeing and so on.

**Elsie:** When I came first I was working in Radnorshire and then they asked for volunteers to come to Breconshire to drive tractors. I stayed in the Castle too.

**Phyllis:** I can remember cutting the gorse, that was the worst job I think.

**Irene:** I hated burning the old straw. There was always a bit you'd missed and I used to wonder what we were doing it for?

I used to enjoy threshing and bailing in teams. One of you would stand on either side of the bail and tie the straw up by wrapping the wire around and the other one would put the iron needle through so you could connect it through the middle to make a tied-up bail. If you were on with a dosey one though she would wouldn't get the pin in in time and the bails would carry on moving and go off all loose and we'd both get in trouble!

**Elsie:** I remember threshing once as it got dark and the sunset was beautiful. I wrote a letter home about it and my mother gave it to my father asking what novels I'd been reading!

Interview with Elsie Gwynne, Irene Gwynne and Phyllis Davies.

- **Find out what local people thought of the girls...**

your comments

**Kevin Whitchurch, Devon**

In reply to John Batts, Sydney. I think the gardener was my grandfather, Fred Whitchurch.

Mon Feb 1 09:28:39 2010

**Helen McMonagle from Clydebank**

I am a serving soldier and in 2003 marched the Womens Land Army past the Cenotaph in London. I am currently posted in HQ 160 (W) Bde in Brecon as the BOWO.  
Thu Jan 15 14:40:59 2009

**John S. Batts, Sydney NSW.**

I was quite interested to read the reminiscences of the trio of Land Girls. As a young child I do recall meeting on several occasions a Miss Robinson, who was in charge of the Land Army hostel at Maesllwch Castle, Glasbury. She used to come into my mother's shop in Hay and she, too, clearly loved to tell stories about her "charges" at Maesllwch; a doubtless then impressionable mind that has since (I hope) matured still suggests today that Miss Robinson's yarns leaned towards the scandalous! There was also at Maesllwch a gardener (name forgotten) who also liked to tell stories to this! youngster.

Sun Jan 4 15:55:21 2009

**Susan Macpherson New Zealand**

Thank you for this. I've enjoyed reading the memories. I am the daughter of May Craven, from Yorkshire, who spent happy years in the Land Army, in Llanfaes, Brecon, and at Sennybridge.

Fri Oct 10 09:59:14 2008

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## Land Army

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In April 2008 Elsie Gwynne, Irene Gwynne and Phyllis Davies told us about their experiences as Land Girls in Radnorshire and Brecknockshire. Read about how people responded to the Land Army and how they worked and played hard:



### How did people respond to you?

**Irene:** The War-Ag would send us out to do jobs, farms would apply to have us for a few days and then feed us. Some were really mean and you wouldn't even get a cup of tea, but others were lovely and couldn't do enough for you. Then it was like having Christmas dinner! One family though had lovely food and all sat opposite us while we had the awful stuff. My husband-to-be used to put the meat that was like gristle in a handkerchief and the dogs would chase him!

The farms up near Phyllis' were nice, the hill farmers were the nicest. The lower ones didn't want you in their homes. I remember Ifor Thomas and his family though, he would always pick you up in his car and then you had to dine with them and they had a maid!

**Elsie:** I remember working on a feeding drum and the bloke running it kept telling off the regular workman for burning the chuff-it was a hot week-and there were three of us up on the top working for a week and he lit it again and the whole lot went up. They had to untie the horses...but of course the Land Girls were blamed. We were out in Brecon at night and heard people blaming us but I put them right and told them it was the workman and that I had been there so I knew!

The local girls could do nothing wrong but if we so much as looked at a guy it was assumed something was going on.

I remember coming home one Friday night after work and being given my wages and told my friend and I were going to London on a course about tractors. After the travel we had no money so couldn't buy any food. We were stuck in Reading for ages because of heavy raids and only got to London at 10pm and it was an awful hostel. The warden said we couldn't have anything so we had no food for almost 24hrs. My friend found us some breakfast the next morning and then we had to rush off for this course with no directions.

We had to go round all the people from the Army, Navy and Air Force looking for where we were supposed to be and then study for two weeks and then we had an exam which we hadn't been told about. I hated setting contact breaker points and knew that would be on the exam, I sat on the upturned bucket and cried and we both only just scraped through!

### How did you find it when you started?

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**Irene:** It was so different coming from a town...I grew up in London and had only been to a farm once with the Country Cottage fund for town children to see a farm in Dorset.

**Elsie:** I got to Glasbury in March but it was really hot. A girl met us but the trucks were all busy and we had to walk and it was a mile and a half away! I hated the boots we had to wear so walked without them, the girls used to wear them in for me when working.

I remember the Fuller greengrocers in Llandrindod and Mrs Fuller thought it was awful we had to carry the big sacks on our backs. She called us 'you gals' and in the summer would have a glass of lemonade ready for me and hot chocolate in the winter.

**Elsie:** I was the first girl to drive a combine here... and I'll never forget there was one man who shook his head and said 'it isn't right a little girl like that...!'

I'll tell you what was heavy work...we had to heave 100 weight bags of slag and lime to put in the machine. And the loose lime and hot lime we had to shovel off the back of the tractor fell on my friend Edna's heel...

**Irene:** I remember arriving at Middlesex and being told I was looking after a horse. I didn't know one end of a horse from another!

People would think we were fast if we wore a sun top working out in the fields to get a tan. I cut my dungarees too! But in the winter it was so cold that my uncle who was a porter at Covent Garden gave me some long johns to go under the dungarees. I sewed up the fly and there they would be hanging in the laundry room at the Castle where the girls would wait to meet their friends!

**Elsie:** All we did was roll up our sleeves and dungarees! I remember going home and the trains would be so packed we would have to use the cattle truck and we were given nylons by some men in there once!

**Irene:** My first pair of nylons were those glass nylons. I was lodging with a family and the son bought me a pair. I brought them to the castle and when there was a fire we had to get out and were told to bring what we needed and all I grabbed were these nylons. Not my purse or money!

**Elsie:** We used to have fire practice and there was a barrel pump which two girls would stand either side of to pump the water. My maiden surname was Bird and my friend's was Pie and we were told 'Bird and Pie on hose' and we didn't take it too seriously, and chatted away. When the water came on it was so powerful we let go and it went all over the place! We mowed down all the daffodils!

I remember once the Minister for Ag was coming and his name was Hudson. One little girl had to shout 'three cheers for Mr Hudson' when he came but when she saw him her mind went blank and she couldn't remember his name and all I could think of was Hudson's Soap so I told her soap and she shouted out '3 cheers for Mr Soap!' And then we had to run for the train to Brecon...

**Irene:** We used to get a lift in the trucks...

**Elsie:** The American's would take us the last bit of the way in their jeeps but by then your hair would be all over the place, we wore so many clips then and they would all come out.

We were supposed to be in at 10pm or 11pm on a Saturday unless we got special permission. We had to get permission to go to the dances too, they had marvellous dances at the army hospital. We used to get people to leave the windows open for us so we could sneak in. We got caught once and had to stay in for the whole weekend!

**Irene:** I remember being stuck in for 6 weeks in the snow of 1947. We had one bucket of water between two of us for washing each day and had to decide whether to let one girl have a decent wash or have half each! Eventually we tunnelled out...

### **Did you meet interesting people?**

**Irene:** We did meet all sorts of people from all over the country too. We were working with prisoners of war too. I found the Italians really lazy but the Germans were wonderful workers, and I say that having been bombed out by them in London twice.

Two of our girls married Germans, Gladys went to Yorkshire with her husband who was German.

**Elsie:** Do you remember Heinz, Phyllis? His father was an old Prussian. He had a boy of 6 and was in the Navy and was very nice to work with. He used to ask me for English words to learn overnight.

There was an old German miner too who worked with Tudor [Elsie's husband] and he thought so much of Tudor he would ride over on his bike from Presteigne for work, and he kept in touch for years. Another one named his baby girl after me!

My father-in-law was a dentist and one day Tudor had lost George and went looking for him. He found him in the barn trying to pull his own tooth out so Tudor took him to his step-father and they were so grateful his mother sent us a thank you letter.

The Italians were good singers though. There was one famous tenor who would do arias for us on request! And they always had great food...

**Irene:** I used to save up my rations of butter and sugar and tea and send them to my mother in London.

**Phyllis:** Do you remember having beetroot sandwiches?!

**Elsie:** I've had no sugar in my tea since the war, none in my family have [both Irene and Phyllis agree].

### **What happened next for you?**

**Elsie:** Tudor, Edna and I were working up on the common and no-one told us the war was over! We worked all day and came down to find people had been celebrating all the time. I had been teaching Tudor and his brother to dance in the house and when we were out dancing that night Tudor got too embarrassed, he thought everyone was looking at him so I danced with Joe instead! I got married to Tudor and stayed in the Land Army.

**Phyllis:** I was in Brecon that day-we thought they wouldn't want us anymore but they did, they said we had to keep going!

**Irene:**I was in Middlesex when the war ended and came up here in 1945. I stayed until the hostel closed and I went to Devon for 2 months but it was awful so I went home. I had met my future husband Selwyn (Phyllis' brother) at a dance at St Peters and we wrote to each other but were just friends. He was in Hong Kong and got sent to a military hospital in Uxbridge near Middlesex and I visited him there. We were married 58 years ago today. We moved here in 1954 after living in Germany for a couple of years.

Interview with Elsie Gwynne, Irene Gwynne and Phyllis Davies.

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## Elsie Gwynne

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Elsie Gwynne came to Mid Wales from Yorkshire when she was 19 to join the Land Army. Here she describes her memories of arriving at Glasbury station:



◀ [Listen to Elsie Gwynne...](#)

"Well, when I came here I was 19, and I'd never travelled far on my own, you know and my father took me to the station and he said, well you'll see some other girls in uniform...make yourself known like, which I did.

And so we travelled, I was lucky because they were coming to Brecon, so I travelled down with them like, you know, and coming now towards Glasbury looking over the countryside and I said then, ooh I'm going-we didn't know where we had to go to a hostel-and I said ooh I'm gonna live in that castle up there. But we didn't even know then that it was the hostel! And I was surprised when we got up because it were, as Rennie told you before, absolutely gorgeous you know when you saw it.

And there were about 40 girls when I got in. And...one girl had told us we could sit, there were four of us sitting in this place like, you know. And we naturally sat down and had our food there and all of a sudden, well two girls it was, bounced in, well, apart from swearing at us...asking us what we were sitting in that place for, like you know, ooh it was absolutely terrifying because we were sitting in their seats you see and she told us to get out from there.

Well, it so upset me did that, well all of us, you know, that I swore then that if I ever, you know new girls came I would always make sure they would have somewhere to sit because we were absolutely terrified, we were in tears really. We hadn't been used to anything like that, you know.

And then the next morning we were given our jobs where to go and my first job was in the gardens, the rose garden, double digging these rose gardens. I had blisters like nobodies...because I'd never had a spade in me hand, I didn't know what it was!

And then after that I went on the Commons because it were planting potato time and we were planting potatoes round the Commons like and then afterwards I had been there about two months and I was asked, well, to volunteer for tractor driving in Breconshire. So then for the next, how many years was it, about 8 years I drove tractors."

Interview with Elsie Gwynne

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## Phyllis Davies

Last updated: 11 April 2008

Phyllis Davies from Talgarth began by delivering milk when she joined the Land Army. Here she talks about some of the other jobs she remembers doing:



### ◀ [Listen to Phyllis Davies...](#)

"Well, I think the best thing I liked doing was ploughing, really. We used to go...that was just when I came down to work on the War Ag. That was the best days of my life, I think!

It depends what you were doing of course, I mean if you were thrashing you'd go out with the man that's got the drum and you were cutting sheaves all day and feeding the drum and that went on for most of the winter...to get the thrashing all done.

Cutting the Gorse, that was when I was up Llwl up at, round Trecastle. No didn't like that at all. But, mind you, nobody was used to doing that job. And it wasn't a very good job to get used to if it comes to that, was it? Cutting gorse wasn't a very pleasant thing to be doing.

But after that I went on machinery. Up in Trecastle that was, with..., the foreman up there was Bill Leith. And he was a very, very good teacher...you could ask him anything you know, and he's explain everything to you, he was really good Bill Leith was.

I used to go home at weekends but when I came from Pantscallog...they came up to Pantscallog, Sid Jones, you know Sid Jones...Potato Jones [laughs] no not Potato Jones, the one that lived at the mill, that one. He came looking for a girl to go down to the Talgarth area and no-one wanted to volunteer no, they wasn't going. Nobody volunteered so he said to me well you're from Talgarth, won't you come down there? Well, I said if I come down there I'm not going to be lodging in Talgarth because my home is only about three mile away.

He said well I don't know whether they'd allow that...I said well if they don't allow it I'm not going [laughter]. Anyway, they agreed to let me lodge at home and from there on I think Elsie knows more about it than anybody else [laughs]."

Interview with Phyllis Davies

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## Irene Gwynne

Last updated: 11 April 2008

Irene Gwynne's mother didn't want her to join the Land Army in 1945. Here Irene talks about how important the experience has been:



### Listen to Irene Gwynne...

"Well it got me out of London which was what I...I was ready to fly the nest really you know. My mother was a bit possessive but she did let me go in the end and I found it was a marvellous experience, I loved it.

It had its ups and downs but, what did I learn? I don't know...hard work, that's for a start. Well, we worked hard and we played hard, you know. Met some lovely people, I mean I've still got friends now that I probably would never, well, I wouldn't ever have met them would I, if I hadn't come down here?

Well, it was a great life...you mixed with everybody and anybody. Well, I'm glad that I did make the break to be honest, and also bringing up my children when I look at London now I'm glad I had the opportunity to bring up my children in this sort of atmosphere.

Because when I've been back and seen how my friends live afraid to let their children, when they were a bit younger, mind, when they were afraid to let their children out of their sight and so therefore I think my children had a much better start in their life because they had freedom. They were allowed to be children longer than if they had been brought up in town.

When I was brought up in London it was so much different. You did have your freedom then, you had your little communities the same. So much has changed, in the war. Everybody had changed anyway, everybody had moved about, I don't think things could [go back], no, I don't think so.

I did not want too go back, no. I mean, I went back because it was the only place I could go, to family. I was hoping to, eventually, get out again. Go and do something else you know. If I hadn't met my husband then, probably I would have done, I'd have travelled somewhere else. Because, no, I didn't want to go back to town. Once you've had the freedom of the country and the country ways are so much different to town, you know.

Not that I didn't enjoy my childhood, it was lovely. I've got no regrets in town but of the two I think the country ways are much much better.

And I think now, how did I go and do that? You know, I was

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17 and left, you travel all this way and you know, I mean Wales was a foreign country to us. I had a niece and she said do they all sit...she said where are you going and I said well, I'm going to Wales, so she said do they all wear those big hats? And do they sit spinning? So I said no [laughter]!

She was really convinced, that was the stereotype of the Welsh person, a Welsh woman, really...and spinning, by the door...

Funnily enough that niece of mine, when I was living in Trefecar she used to spend all her summer holidays with me. Beryl, remember? And she loved it, and I used to say you see, you don't see any women spinning and nobody in the funny hats, I don't wear a funny hat! And she loved it down here, I mean she's married with grandchildren now but she often says when I speak to her on the phone she used to love her six weeks in the country. So I gave her the taste of a country life.

No, its completely different but I've never regretted a minute. Some of my happiest years of my life were down in the Land Army. Despite the hard work and the blisters and everything and being shouted at when you did something wrong [laughs].

Even Major D'Winton once called me a so and so...who's that so and so fool. We were doing something with sheep you know, and you know how stupid they are and one got away and I went to go for it and I missed it and landed in a puddle and of course once that got away all the other sheep started to go and he said who's that so and so fool that let that, you know. Ooh I could have hit him, I was so cross [laughs]!

But it was a great life and I think it made me what I am today I suppose, all those experiences do don't they?"

Interview with Irene Gwynne

- **Audio from the Land Girls...**

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