

WOMEN'S LAND ARMY IN FLINTSHIRE

The WLA was originally founded in the First World War. When the Second World War commenced it was apparent that there would be a shortage of food as the British Isles were not self-sufficient and relied on importing food. Convoys of ships carrying precious supplies were being torpedoed. The Ministry of Agriculture started by increasing livestock, trying for larger yields of cereals, etc. One method was by requisitioning land that had not been previously cultivated for potatoes and cereals. In Flintshire, the Ministry of Agriculture office was at Mold. Men working on the land were being called up for the forces leaving a reduced workforce to farm the land which now included all the new proposed cultivated land. The Women's Land Army was reformed, this time on a larger scale, with Lady Denman as Honorary Director and her home Balcolme Place, London, as headquarters where all records of the girls' numbers, movements and supplies, etc were kept.

The WLA was said to be run by women, with each county having its own organising secretary. Mrs. Joyce Peyton of Hafod, Gwernymynydd, Mold offered her services and her home as headquarters for the Flintshire WLA as her contribution to the war effort. The dining-room became the stores and the billiard-room her office. She was in charge of all the issuing and collection of uniforms and their replacement (and collecting the relevant clothing coupons) with help from Mrs. Harkness. She was assisted by other volunteers in the county. These included Miss Crow, assistant county secretary; Miss May Bibby of Fachwen, St. Asaph as chairman, with the assistance of her sister Miss Gladys Bibby; Mrs. Bishop of Oakenholt; Mrs. Adams; Miss Gwendoline Davies-Cooke; Mrs. Johnson of Greenfield; Mrs. Gladstone, Hawarden; Lady Hanmer; Lady Mostyn; Mrs. Roberts of Vaenol Fawr, and others. This team were involved in the county in interviewing girls prior to joining, seeing to their welfare (some girls were homesick and went home), and visiting the hostels and farms to check on conditions on a regular basis. Suitable wardens had to be found. Problems arose when girls did not like a farm and there were poor conditions and moves had to be arranged. The Ministry of Agriculture arranged the work and some training was given, although this varied.

The WLA girls who volunteered came from all walks of life, mostly without any experience of farm work. In Flintshire about 25% were local, the rest mainly from Yorkshire and Lancashire. One essential condition imposed on a volunteer was that she had to go wherever she was sent or needed. Interviewing numerous girls and finding how often they moved areas, farms and hostels makes one realise how much organisation was needed both by the Ministry of Agriculture and the WLA officials.

A number of Flintshire WLA girls were interviewed and measured for their clothes by Lady Mostyn. WLA girls from other counties usually had their uniforms sent to their homes prior to arriving in Flintshire. Each girl was issued with a number. Clothing ration coupons had to be surrendered for their uniform. In 1942 this was thirty-six coupons, in 1944 going down to twenty-four coupons, with a note stating that as agricultural workers they were entitled to an extra ten coupons. The uniform consisted of one hat; great coat; cream aertex shirts; one green pullover; one pair brown breeches; two pairs of dungarees; one overall coat; six pairs of stockings, with darning wool; one heavy pair of shoes; gum boots, and oilskin. No other clothing was issued, not even gloves for tractor drivers. There was no approved way to wear the uniform, and when hats were worn they appeared at all angles. Head scarves and turbans became standard for work in the fields. To save coupons and overcome the shortage arm slings were purchased from the chemist at 2s. 6d., dyed and utilised as turbans. If one left the WLA the uniform had to be handed back. Replacement

clothes were issued when required but at times it was difficult to persuade Mrs. Peyton that clothes had worn out.

The girls started for a period of two months during which time several gave up and went home to do other war work, usually munitions or the forces. They were all young, never been away from home, which was often too far away to make a weekend visit, and homesickness caused some resignations. Training was almost non-existent. On some of the rural farms Welsh was the first language, which caused difficulties and problems on both sides, but mainly for the land girls. Toilet facilities were another problem. One Flintshire girl said the first day's work was the longest in her life as she had no idea what was happening. Yet another Flintshire girl enrolling at the same time went to the Madryn Farm Institute near Pwllheli for training. Llysfasi had some training courses but no Flintshire WLA girl has mentioned attending them. Farms at Aston Hall, Queensferry and that of Mr. Edwards of Caerwys have been mentioned where girls were given short courses on dairying and no doubt there were others. Printed literature mentions correspondence courses to improve knowledge.

A six-day week was worked - 8 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. Bikes with a rack at the back were provided to enable girls to travel to various farms, or transport was arranged. If they were used for trips to the cinema at Mold in the evening they had to be deposited in the Police Station as they were government property. Overtime was paid at a standard rate. All this was for twenty-five shillings a week with board and lodgings and two weeks holiday. The first recorded land girl in Flintshire, starting on a farm in the Maelor was in 1939 then a total of ten in the county. The number of girls working on farms increased but by 1940 it was apparent that more WLA girls were needed and there was insufficient accommodation. In Flintshire by 1943 the number had increased to over 500 and in 1944 to over 600. The increase of land held by the Ministry of Agriculture caused problems, as usually there were no corresponding farms to house the girls.

The requisitioning of hostels was dealt with by the Ministry of Labour and some run by the YWCA. In the early 1940s the first hostels were being requisitioned. In certain areas new hostels had to be built, usually by the Ministry of Agriculture, where no large properties were available. Some hostels like Rhuddlan had an official opening ceremony when on 30 May 1942 it was opened by Rear Admiral Rowley-Conwy. Miss May Bibby welcomed the girls and addresses given by the church and chapel ministers. A contrast to Bryn Alyn, Rhydymwyn when the tired girls arrived from Yorkshire to find only the warden and had to use candles to write letters home. A warden was appointed to run each hostel and lived on the premises in her own apartment with assistant wardens in the larger hostels. They had to ensure strict hours were kept, usually return by 11 p.m. unless a late pass had been obtained.

Cooks and cleaners were recruited locally but these usually lived in their own homes. In every hostel the girls slept in wooden bunk beds, the number depending on the size of the room. Everything was very basic with tables and benches in common-rooms and not much comfort. Sometimes a piano was donated to the common-room. A head girl was appointed in each hostel to delegate work to the other girls and collect their work cards which were signed by the farmers after a days work. Later, driving courses were arranged and this enabled the head girl to take some girls to work to save time riding their bicycles, although if they worked late in the harvest time and missed the car they were expected to walk back to their hostel. Drivers were also expected to take the warden shopping, collect bike parts and repair them.

The Hostels

Flintshire had ten hostels. One of the first to be built was in Abbey Road, Rhuddlan - the owners of the land living in Manchester. It was built in the shape of a T in brick, opened May 1942 for twenty-six girls and extended in 1943 for thirty-four girls. When it opened girls came from Lancashire, Yorkshire, London with some Flintshire girls and one Russian! Mrs. Owen, Mrs. Huxley and Mrs. Norman were some of the wardens. Today only a small part of this hostel can still be seen as part of a caravan park. There was another small hostel at Draenwen, Princess Road, Rhuddlan. The owner, a vicar's widow had died in 1942 so it was probably opened about 1943. This accommodated twelve girls all allocated to dairy farms. They would work different hours to other WLA girls to ensure two milkings.

Aresylla, Mount Road, St. Asaph was a large Victorian house requisitioned from a Dr. Quinly (who had moved to a smaller house). It opened about 1942 with twenty-four girls, again mainly from English counties and closed after 1948. There were various wardens, one, a Mrs. Callaghan, kept a photograph of her sailor son on her desk and was noted as being very keen on time and discipline. This son was later to become prime minister.

Eithanfa, Carmel was a large brick double-fronted house. It had belonged to a Dr. Burns but was probably empty at the time. The house inside had to be altered to cater for about eighteen girls, mainly from Yorkshire and Lancashire, and the coach house became the bicycle-shed. It opened in early 1943 and closed October 1948. The first warden was Mrs. Windows, followed by two spinster sisters.

Bryn Alyn, Rhydymwyn was on the Gwysaney Estate and was probably offered to the WLA. On 25 March 1943 it was decided to adapt it but the clerks of Holywell RDC and Flintshire County Council complained that they had not been informed of alterations. Assurances had been given by Parliament that all government departments would before carrying out any work seek observations of local authorities. It opened 31 August 1943 with six bedrooms, each with three bunk beds. A large group of Yorkshire girls came down mainly from Leeds area and filled the hostel. When they left or moved their places were filled with girls from Liverpool and Flintshire. The girls found this hostel a bit of a culture shock, girls coming from homes with electricity found oil lamps, candles, Tilley lamps and cooking on an Aga. The first warden was Miss Gilbard (who later moved to Holywell school). It closed for a short while in 1946 when there was no work, and finally in 1947 due to bad weather when the girls were transferred to other hostels.

Rhual, Mold was one of the smaller hostels. Mrs. Heaton as well as having evacuees from Liverpool volunteered to have a group of land girls. They had the main bedroom fitted with bunk beds and the dining-room was their mess room. The majority of girls in this hostel worked in pest control. Mrs. Heaton's cousin and another also stayed in the house as WLA girls but they worked in the kitchen garden only. The family cook/housekeeper provided very good food for the family and the WLA girls.

Mold hostel was a purpose-built hostel. A brick-built hostel, off St. David's Road, with accommodation for thirty girls including six cubicles for senior and older girls. It probably opened early 1942 and closed in 1950. Like other hostels it had a warden, etc but was also used as headquarters for Miss Crow, the deputy county secretary. There was a potato clamp by the side of this hostel. The site has now been developed as a driving test centre and Job Centre.

Windover, Leeswood can be described as an art nouveau style house built in 1935 for a Mr. Royal from Manchester, said to be a millionaire who made his fortune developing the whistling kettle, as a holiday home for his wife. It was probably requisitioned as it wasn't fully occupied. The housekeeper had a room downstairs and it held about eighteen girls. It opened in 1942 and closed in 1946.

Manor Farm, Manor Lane, Hawarden also known as the Sandycroft Hostel, was on the Gladstone Estate and held thirty to forty girls. I have no known date of opening but it closed in 1946.

Sealand Hostel's plans were drawn in July 1942 by F Roberts of Mold and it opened in 1943. It was built in the shape of a cross with two large dormitories each with thirty-two bunks. It probably had extra wardens and staff to run the large hostel. Most of the girls worked in Bees nurseries but twelve worked for the Welsh land settlement. The girls in this hostel worked entirely in horticulture. It closed in 1946. This hostel is unused but still standing in the grounds of Burgess agricultural works at Sealand.

The next two hostels are in the detached part of Flintshire in the Maelor. Queensbridge Hostel, Overton was a large house built in 1910 by a General Lloyd. It held fifty-three girls and opened in 1943. The first warden was a Miss Davies and assistant warden, Miss Guy. They were followed by Miss Owen assisted by Miss Jones and Miss Edwards, then Miss Balforth and Mrs. Moore. Although it was isolated it was very popular. When it closed in June 1948 the girls were very sad to move from the beautiful building to Hanmer hostel.

Hanmer was another designed by F Roberts of Mold in 1943. It was unpopular and said to be built of tin and asbestos which probably made it very cold. It was built to accommodate thirty girls and staff (see plan on p.). It is however a good example showing the kind of facilities required: cycle racks, drying-room for wet clothes, bathrooms, showers, toilets, etc to cater for a large number of girls. The dining-room was also used as a recreation room. The warden's quarters were attached and the valuable stores kept under her watchful eyes. In 1948, Lord Kenyon was prepared to lease the site at £5 quarterly but in 1952, after the hostel had closed he purchased the buildings (described as temporary) for £2,000. He wanted to adapt them for use as farm workers' hostel for the home farm and a village hall. Today there is a large detached house on part of the site and the other part has a hall/doctors' surgery.

At first the girls only worked on farms. Conditions varied, as well as the quality of the food. Examples of life on the farm have been given by two ex land girls from Lancashire. One girl recalled her work: milked cows by hand, fed chickens, went to Mold auction, cut wood to reduce it to size for the fires, grew corn, threshing events when all the farmers helped each other and she found herself the only female. She was taught to harness horses and break young shire horses. Her hands froze when lifting turnips from the frozen ground. Turnips and mangolds were cut by machine for feed and milk had to be skimmed and made into butter. As she was of small stature she found lifting one hundredweight bags of corn almost made her double up. She worked seven days a week, had odd days and every third weekend off. She was paid £1 2s. 6d. a week and was encouraged to save out of it.

The second farm girl worked on a dairy farm with another girl and was expected to work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., with the last milking at 10 p.m. Milk had to be cooled, bottles cleaned and milk delivered. In heavy snow a sledge was used. The work also included hay-making, threshing corn,

lifting bags of potatoes and bales of hay. She found the work at times very heavy. She had one weekend off in three.

Generally the work of hostel girls was not as varied as the work done by the girls living on farms. They tended to be employed by the smaller farmers when required. The Ministry of Agriculture also needed them on their land sites where they had a small workforce. They were mainly field workers, picking potatoes, and photographs show that horses were used as well as tractors. If times were slack they were sent to work at the various potato clamps in different areas. These were organised by the Ministry of Agriculture. When the girls were working in these areas they would be collected from the hostels in large lorries belonging to the Ministry of Agriculture. Threshing gangs for harvesting was the main purpose and the work was found to be very dry and dusty. Some of the girls, however, became very competent and usually worked in pairs. However there were serious accidents when hair or limbs caught in the belt of the machinery. They also operated a device like a sewing-machine with a huge needle, which was taken from farm to farm for making a type of thatching to cover the valuable hay, .

When working on some of the larger farms the girls were often not offered cups of tea etc when the male farm workers had a drink. Generally they had better conditions when visiting smaller farms, lunches instead of their snappin and harvest suppers in spite of rationing. Prisoners-of-war were sometimes sent on the land to assist the WLA girls. Girls working on the land settlement at Sealand and at Bees had no contact with any farmers. The sandwiches provided were fig and date, beetroot and cheese, and the usual spam. Here they worked a five-day week with weekends off. Most of the work was horticultural, weeding carrots, cutting cauliflowers, spreading manure and bonemeal. They were horrified when told to plant thousands of seedlings with a dibber. Amazingly in spite of chronic back-ache they managed the numbers and earned extra money. At Sealand they were helped by ex-miners but found lifting crates of vegetables very heavy. An enjoyable occupation was picking tomatoes in the greenhouses. Corn stacking in the fields caused bad scratches on arms and other parts of the body.

When some of the common at Brynford was enclosed in 1943 a group of girls were detailed to spread lime by shovel into piles and rows over 365 acres. In September 1942 they are praised in a local newspaper as doing well, with over three hundred of them in the county and demand increasing. They were said to enjoy their work and their services appreciated.

Some jobs were specialised. Most hostels had at least one girl on pest control all the time. A national weekly journal described a group of four in Flintshire as the 'Lady-killers of vermin'. The group had more than a local reputation for destroying vermin in the local farms. Between February 1941 and April 1942 they had destroyed 3,545 rabbits, 7,689 rats, 1,668 foxes and 1,901 moles. The moles were sent to Buckley where they were skinned and stuck on a board and sold for one shilling each. Girls with a talent for water divining were sent to farms where a source of water was needed. Tractor driving was essential work performed by the girls.

Training varied considerably. Tractor driving and maintenance were organised at Rodbaston Hall, Staffordshire for four weeks and one girl trained there spent the next four years driving tractors full time, with great skill, all over the county wherever required. Local courses were started to train the girls but were not always well organised. Two girls arriving at Sealand Bank Farm (before the hostel was built) for a course found the farmer's wife had no room. The result was that for the next fortnight they lived at home at Ffynnongroyw, cycled to Mostyn for the train to Queensferry, and walked to Sealand - a twelve hour day. Later courses were held on Ministry of Agriculture land at Ffrith y Garreg Wen. In 1942, the WLA was very proud of two of their girls who had reaped by themselves the whole of the corn crop of 210 acres at Ffrith y Garreg Wen. It took one hour twenty

minutes just to drive the tractor round the edge of the site. Driving tuition was held from Mold depot situated on the old railway station. Pupils under instruction were expected to call at hostels etc to deliver and collect stores and repair bikes while they were learning to drive. Although conditions were not as good as in the hostels, most girls preferred it because of the comradeship and made friends for life.

Some of the farm girls never had contact with any other land girls. The general working life of a WLA girl was three years before they left to get married. Some returned, others had a family, or if married to a farmer helped him on the farm. During their time in Flintshire they had visits from one of the committee in their area and any problems were sorted out. Hostel girls moved to farms for short periods, moves at times even out of the county. Not every move was popular and some went home if they did not like the new place. However, they could ask to be moved if they found conditions intolerable on the farm or hostel. The wardens were also moved and monitored to ensure the girls were in capable hands and enquiries set up if a fault was found.

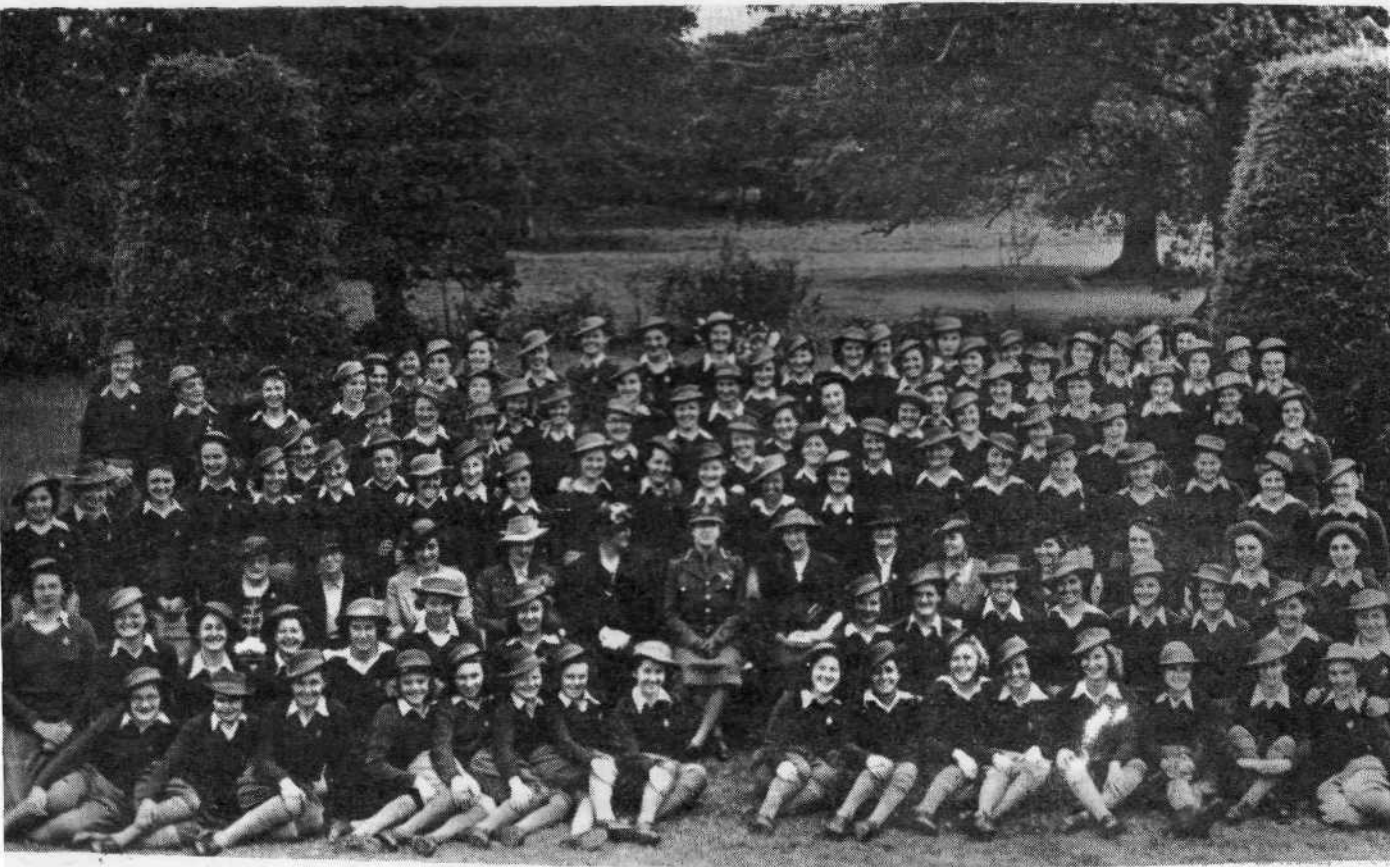
The timber section of the land army was formed in 1942. Timber could not be imported and was badly needed for pit props to keep the coal mines open and only a few forestry workers were left. Their uniform was the same but distinguished by a beret with a badge of two woodmans' axes crossed. In 1942 a rough sample census was made of all the woodland in Britain, and this was the basis for the timber areas.

One training centre was at Wetherby where girls were shown how to cut trees, saw pit props, load wood, sharpen saws, identify trees, measure and cost wood. After training, the work was allocated depending on the ability of the girls, the top work being measurers, although girls starting on simpler work like loading lorries could work their way up. Vacancies appeared for Flintshire and three measurers volunteered. After two months' training at the office of the Ministry of Supply in City Road, Chester they were sent to depots in Flintshire - one each to Leeswood, Gwysaney and Caerwys (there might have been another depot in Penley). Each unit had a foreman, chief measurer and four measurers in the outlying woods, as well as other staff. In Caerwys the girls lived in digs, making pit props and telegraph posts. The chief measurer had a little wooden office with a stove by Afonwen station. She had to send all the accounts to Chester and calculate the salaries for all the forestry workers. The money for salaries - several hundred pounds - was sent to Afonwen Post Office to be collected by the chief measurer and taken up the hill in a bag for distribution. There were about twenty timber girls and forty men (mainly physiologically or medically unfit). The timber section girls were also moved. One girl arriving at Caerwys in 1945 had started in Wetherby for training, moved to Morpeth, Macclesfield, sawmills at Salford, Pennal Machynlleth, Denbigh, Henllan, and finally Caerwys. Recruiting had stopped in 1943 because of other claims, and in 1946 the units were closed down. Girls were transferred to the WLA.

The WLA Benevolent Fund was formed in November 1942. In Flintshire Mrs. Caswell of Prestatyn was honorary secretary and treasurer. Queen Elizabeth was patron. It was a registered charity to provide financial, medical and other assistance, financial help for the education of WLA members and their families, and to help with loans for WLA who wished to stay on the land after the war. Royalties on books written on WLA and Timber Section were donated and other donations requested. It is not known if any WLA girl in Flintshire used this fund. St. Elmo's Convalescent Home at Paignton, Devon was financed by the American Church Fund and run by the Americans. It was also a rest home and girls from Flintshire staying there appreciated the marvellous surroundings and hospitality.

The WLA girls were issued with an uniform that had to be returned if they left. Every six months they were given a red cloth diamond to sew onto their greatcoat. These were joined together denoting length of service. When they left they were given a release certificate stating number and length of service, together with a letter from the Queen. Although memories vary, a large number of girls are certain they never received these documents.

In July 1942 Princess Mary, Princess Royal, went to Bodrhyddan where the Lord Lieutenant of the county, Rear Admiral Rowley-Conwy, invited about 115 WLA girls from all parts of the county. The girls lined up in front of the hall where they were inspected by the princess accompanied by Miss Bibby. She stopped to chat to several of the girls. One of these was Miss D Davies from Bryn Bella who had served in the previous war and commenced duties on the outbreak of the latest hostilities. The committee members were presented and afterwards a photograph was taken with Princess Mary, and Rear Admiral Rowley-Conwy offered to provide a copy to each member present (see below). He also provided refreshments.



The Queen was patron of the WLA. In July 1943 she invited three hundred WLA girls from all over the country to tea at Buckingham Palace; it is not known who attended from Flintshire. At a later date, for a similar event, Marjorie Weekes and Betty Barrat from Queensbridge went to London, sleeping in the underground for two nights. Elsie Bullock from Bryn Alyn, and Olive Street from Mold spent two nights sleeping in an hotel corridor. Purses of money were given to the Queen for the YWCA.

For the majority, VE Day appeared a normal working day. In Sealand they were sheltering under the hedges out of the rain. In Overton they worked, and when they arrived at the village for a celebration drink in the evening, the pub was so full they couldn't get in, and when they did the pub had run dry! Bryn Alyn hostel gave the girls a twenty-four hour pass. They were mostly from Yorkshire and streamed down to Rhydymwyn station, bought 19/11 return tickets for Leeds, spent most of the night in sidings, but eventually celebrated in their home town. One girl returning home from leave at Rhuddlan, not knowing it was VE Day, met the girls all leaving the hostel so turned around and celebrated at Newton-le-Willows. A farm girl was given the door key when she went down to Ffynngroyw with her fiancé to celebrate in the evening. Here they had tables outside the pub and everybody joined in the celebrations. One from the Wirral went back to Hamilton Square for the dancing and entertainment. At Rhual a group went to Gwernaffield church where Mr. Corfield gave a short prayer for the land girls.

On 29 May 1948 a farewell party was held at the home of Miss Bibby at Fachwen, St. Asaph. She was chairman of the WLA Committee and it was on the occasion of the retirement of the committee, members and representatives. Invitations were sent to land girls. In November 1948 Mona Jones of St. Asaph went to London to represent WLA in Flintshire at Westminster Abbey. Lord Halifax and the royal family were present at the service. In October 1969 the WLA decided to hold a reunion at the Albert Hall. A committee was formed in this area of land girls from Cheshire, Flintshire and Denbighshire who made contact with local WLA girls. A special badge was given to each of the committee members. It is of interest that one of the committee had been a land girl in the first war.

Today our WLA girls are pensioners. Alas, many of them are with us no more. A large number are still living in the country having married local boys. A few photographs show the girls in uniform at their weddings outside the church forming a guard of honour complete with hoes, and some were married from the hostels. This was the first time a large number of the female population was settled into the area. They enjoyed their time with the WLA although the work was hard, social life limited - mainly through lack of transport, with the exception of village halls and at army bases.

Friendships have been made which are still continuing. Queensbridge hostel still has an annual reunion every September. However they feel that compared to other war work their contribution has not been appreciated. They are rarely mentioned in any services, or take part in memorial events. It is hoped that this article illustrates their valuable contribution without which the war might not have been won.

I would like to thank all ex-members of the WLA who have patiently answered my questions and lent photographs etc which will be deposited in the Hawarden archives to ensure there is a record of their war contribution.