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## Women’s Land Army

Muck-spreading, rat-gassing, carrot-pulling — all in a day’s work for a land girl! You probably know the land girls as plucky young women who rolled up their sleeves and kept Britain’s farms running during the Second World War.

In this episode, we're digging deeper into the history of the Women's Land Army using unique collections at The National Archives. Discover fascinating stories of everyday bravery and the no-nonsense women who were enlisted in what the Ministry of Information called the 'Battle for Bread'. Hosting this episode is Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, a Principal Records Specialist in Diverse Histories, and she is joined by specialists Cherish Watton, Chloe Lee and Katherine Howells.

Documents from The National Archives used in this episode: [MAF 421](#), [INF 3/108](#), [MAF 59/21-22](#)

For more information about the records covered in this episode, look at our research guide to [Women’s Land Army](#). For help navigating our catalogue, you can watch our [top-level tips on using Discovery](#).

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Transcript

**Vicky Iglkowski-Broad:** Muck-spreading, rat-gassing, carrot-pulling — all in a day’s work for a land girl!

If you’ve heard of the land girls, you’ll probably know them as plucky young women who rolled up their sleeves and kept Britain’s farms running during the Second World War.

You might not know that the Women’s Land Army was actually established in 1917, during the First World War. Or, at its peak around 1944, it comprised more than 80,000 women. These ‘land girls’, as they were nicknamed, left behind towns and cities across the country, to move to the nation’s farms. While men had gone off to fight in the trenches, women were enlisted to work on the land, fighting in what the Ministry of Information later coined as the ‘Battle for Bread’.

**Reader:** 06.30am. Our milking takes about two hours, operated both by hand and machine. After the cans have been washed I come in for breakfast, and then, donning a white apron, I make my appearance as a dairymaid.... Cheese-making to me is quite the most interesting creative work I have ever tried, and is a very satisfying occupation after having sat on an office stool and pushed a pen for thirteen years.

**Vicky:** Mary Price wrote this account of her new daily life on a farm in Cheshire in November 1941. It was published in The Land Girl magazine, which is one source from our collections I’ll be using a lot in this episode to help me learn about women like Mary.

**Reader:** Early afternoon... Off comes the apron and on goes the khaki coat, and I sally forth once more to such seasonal jobs as loading and fetching hay and corn, horse raking and turning, calf rearing, pig feeding, gardening, poultry keeping, muck spreading, and all work complementary to the rear end of a cow. Milking brings me to the end of the day’s work, and after becoming myself once more with the aid of the bathroom and my wardrobe, I am always welcomed into the social activities of the family.

**Vicky:** This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

I’m Vicky Iglkowski-Broad, a Principal Records Specialist in Diverse Histories. In this episode of On The Record, I want to dig into the stories of the land girls, using some of the special collections we hold here in Kew at the National Archives.

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I want to get a sense of what it was like to work the land if you’d previously been a secretary, domestic servant, teacher, hairdresser or even if you’d never worked before. To do this, I’ll be hearing from other specialists and diving into the archives. We’ve got some amazing documents to explore, mainly focusing on the Second World War. Iconic recruitment posters, issues of the Land Girl magazine, microfiche copies of alphabetical index cards that contain basic information of individual land girls, and the Women’s Land Army Handbook, which includes the Land Army Song.

**Reader:**

There are many women’s armies,  
But none do work so grand  
As they plough and sow and reap  
And mow – our Women on the Land.  
[Catalogue ref: MAF 59/2]

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad: As you can tell from that song, the women of the Land Army have been somewhat mythologised, even during their lifetime. What was it REALLY like?

To find out, first I need to learn more about the context that brought the Women’s Land Army into being. For that, I’m calling on Cherish Watton. Cherish is a historian at Churchill College, Cambridge. Since 2010, she’s been running a website all about the Women’s Land Army.

**Vicky:** Hi, Cherish, great to have you here.

**Cherish Watton:** Hi there thrilled to be on the podcast.

**Vicky:** Cherish, I thought I’d start by sharing with you an excerpt from a booklet we hold at The National Archives, entitled Join the Land Army.

**Reader:**

“Women of Great Britain, an appeal has never yet been made to you in vain. You have flocked into the Hospitals and Munition Factories; large numbers of you have gone on to the land; you have undertaken every kind of voluntary service. You have shown the same patriotic and fervent spirit as the men, and the War cannot be brought to a victorious end without you. Now this further appeal is made to you.”

**Vicky:** So Cherish, what exactly was that appeal?

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**Cherish:** So in 1917, women were tasked to join the Women's Land Army to help increase the nation's food production. This was sorely needed as in spring of that year, the country only had six weeks food supply left because of the German U-boat campaign which was sinking ships carrying food from abroad. As a nation then we needed to grow more food at home in Britain, when over 100,000 farmers had gone to war, women needed to step into men's shoes and work on the land. The Women's Land Army was set up in 1917 to employ women to carry out this valuable farm work. It was divided into three sections, the agricultural section, a forage section, and a timber cutting section. And women have had a long history of working on the land before, but this was the first time that the government had directed women to carry out agricultural work.

It's interesting and clever that the government appealed to middle-class patriotic young women, in urban areas who wouldn't have had really that much experience working on the land, and therefore, therefore, were very keen to do their bit for the war effort.

**Vicky:** Where did the idea for the Women's Land Army actually come from?

**Cherish:** Before the war, the Women’s Farm and Garden Union had carried out the first experiments intraining to women in agriculture and putting them to work on the land.

In the early days of the war the Women’s Farm and Garden Union met with the President of the Board of Agriculture, Lord Selbourne, to form the Women’s National Land Service Corps. By September 1916, together these organisations had trained 800 women and placed them on the land as permanent workers. A further 1300 women were then put on the land without training.

By the end of 1916, it was realised that this just wasn’t enough, so the Women’s Land Army was formed in 1917 to fill this gap in the agricultural landscape. And this went on to place 23,000 women on the land.

**Vicky:** Wow, that's incredible. So we can see how things started. But how did the Land Army change over time?

**Cherish:** So whilst the Women's Land Army in the First World War employed 23,000 women, when we moved to the Second World War, they employed over 200,000 women, which was this colossal increase in numbers. Most of the women in the Second World War were young in their late kind of teenage years, and in their early 20s, and were single. Most came from towns and cities and therefore had very little experience of working on the land. Some hadn't even seen a cow before, and were then tasked to milk it for the first time.

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The Second World War Women's Land Army was launched in June 1939, three months before the war was declared. In the First World War, it was launched very much towards the end of the war, so in 1917. There was a recognition then, at the start of the Second World War, that women were needed on the land much earlier, and the Women's Land Army was set in place much earlier. So at the beginning of the war, Britain imported 70% of its food supply, but by the end of the war, it was producing 70% of food at home, and the Women's Land Army played a really important role in that process.

And also, if we think about the range of women who joined the Land Army, in the First World War, it was largely made up of middle-class women. Whereas in the Second World War, we see a greater proportion of working-class women being enlisted to become land girls working previously in factories and shops, making their new wartime occupations really quite a change from their previous role.

**Vicky:** Do we know why more working-class women were involved in the Second World War?

**Cherish:** I think that we just needed a much greater number of women to carry out this work. So the appeal just went out to a much larger group of women.

**Vicky:** Do we know what the broader public knew of the Women's Land Army what they thought about them?

**Cherish:** So in the Second World War, the Women's Land Army was frequently reported in the pages of national and local newspapers, often a sign of British patriotism and support for the war effort. They reported on rallies, which were frequently held to highlight the important work being carried out by women, and also as an attempt to dispel the myths of women not being competent enough to carry out their work.

There was a particularly big rally at Arundel Castle in West Sussex in 1943 which Picture Post promoted, showing land girls marching in lines, carrying placards with the Women's Land Army logo. They also printed a shot of two land girls lying on the grass, exhausted at the end of a busy day. You would have also read about women taking proficiency tests which were tests designed to reward the new agricultural knowledge that women had gained in general farming or tractor driving for example. One of my favourite articles I found was a piece headlined 'Lady-killers' of Vermin, highlighting the role of particular land girls who had killed over 7,500 rats in a single week in North Wales. The press commentary often relished in the novelty of the work that many women were carrying out, whilst simultaneously celebrating their work. There's also a particularly prominent shot of two land girls in the fountains in Trafalgar Square on VE Day, celebrating the

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end of the hostilities in Europe.

**Vicky:** Do you think there are things that are still misunderstood about the Women's Land Army?

**Cherish:** So I think the name Women's Land Army suggests that the organisation was a military organisation. In fact, it employed civilian women to carry out farm work, even though it issued women with a uniform and armbands to indicate their length of service. The civilian/military distinction often leads to misunderstanding even today down to where books on the Women's Land Army are placed in bookshops. And whilst many women enjoyed their time in the land, offering a new challenge, a change of lifestyle, a chance to meet new people and an avenue to independence, it wasn't necessarily the best days of all land girls' lives.

Often the more negative accounts of working on the land, whether that revolves around poor health, harassment or loneliness. It doesn't often puncture the popular narratives of the organisation which really kind of takes the sentiments of the brightly coloured posters 'Join the Land Army' at face value. The work was hard physical labour often in isolated locations, and such a change from what many women were doing beforehand. The work was hard physical labour, often in isolated locations. Some women had lifelong medical conditions as a result of their land work, whether it was skin cancer from working out in the sun for days on end, or rheumatism because of the cold weather.

Also, on a very basic level, I don't think many people know the organisation was set up in the First World War. And this planted the seed for the growth of the organisation into the Second World War. And finally, I think far fewer people know about the work of the Women's Timber Corps, which was a sister organisation to the Women's Land Army that was set up in 1942 to employ women to fall timber for the war effort. They were called Lumber Jills.

**Vicky:** There's so much that these women did. Was their work valued, how did they get paid

**Cherish:** At the beginning of the Second World War, so in June 1939, land girls were paid 28 shillings a week. This was 10 shillings less than the average farm wage at the time. This would often be for around 50 hours of work. Half of land girls wages would go on food and accommodation. Wages did increase during the war. So in March 1941, nine girls received 32 shillings but although women were carrying out some of the same work that men had previously carried out, they were not paid the same amount as men. A gendered judgement I think on the value of work being carried out by women.

Upon the disbandment of the Women's Land Army in 1950 some land girls felt poorly treated

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compared to other women service organisations, particularly the military services so the WAFs, the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the ATS, the Auxiliary Territorial Service, and the WRENS the Women's Royal Naval Service.

When land girls left the Women's Land Army they were only issued with their last week's pay, a letter from the Queen thanking them for their efforts, maybe some money for the Women's Land Army Benevolent Fund, their greatcoats if dyed blue and armbands. They also received 20 clothing coupons, but this wasn't the same amount of clothing coupons they'd given up for their uniform in the first place.

Despite wearing uniforms, and being recruited rather like the Armed Forces, the Women's Land Army didn't receive the benefits of other women's services. This was the reason behind the honorary director Lady Gertrude Denman's resignation in 1945, as she felt like girls were being unfairly treated for all the work they had put in. Around this time, then they became known as the Cinderella Army.

**Vicky:** So Cherish, you've been working for a long time on this subject I'm wondering, do you have a favourite land girl?

**Cherish:** That's a really difficult question. As I read about the lives of so many interesting land girls, often sent to me from family members who have sent in questionnaires or memoirs to add on to the website.

I think one of the most interesting profiles I received was for a land girl who was called Gwen, who went from working in a cinema box office to working on the land in Hampshire and Wiltshire, where she thatched, cut hedges, picked vegetables, and learned how to drive a truck.

Now Gwen's account is so rich, she remembers trying cheese and jam sandwiches for the first time, wiping the windscreen of her truck with a raw potato on a particularly foggy night, as well as trying to put out a fire at her hostel. As well as being a really happy time for Gwen, she remembers how she hurt her back so badly from picking potatoes that she took to crawling on all fours to get back to her hostel at the end of the day.

She also recalls a story when a local newspaper took a photograph of her thatching, Gwen had taken off her shirt and tied it around her because she was working in such hot weather. Upon seeing the photograph in print, the Women's Land Army rebuked her for not wearing the correct attire. I think Gwen's story then is really interesting for thinking about the variety of work which women carried out, the new experiences that they had both on the farms, but also in their private lives, but also some of the health and societal challenges which women faced as they carried out

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their work.

**Vicky:** Thank you so much for introducing me to Gwen and what a fascinating character.

**Cherish:** If you want to find out more about her, you can just search Gwen on the website and you can see some of the photographs and her memories of her time in the Land Army.

**Vicky:** Wonderful. Thank you Cherish. Cherish, so we've spoken so much about the land girls, I'm wondering about you, what kind of job would you have liked to have tried from the kind of amazing repertoire of different jobs that land girls did?

**Cherish:** That's such an interesting question, not one that I've actually been asked before. I think I would have liked to have learned how to plough. I feel that learning to drive a tractor was so novel for many land girls who didn't have the opportunity to learn to drive at the time. And learning to drive a tractor was certainly a challenge and learnt on the job from other farm hands. Based on how long it took me to learn how to drive I imagine there would have been a great sense of satisfaction when I could finally plough in a straight line.

**Vicky:** Thank you Cherish, thank you for painting such a vivid picture and giving us such rich context into the lives of these land girls. How can we find out more about them?

**Cherish:** You can go to my website, which is [womenslandarmy.co.uk](http://womenslandarmy.co.uk) which brings together original archival material and general information pages on the work of the Women's Land Army and the Women's Timber Corps.

**Vicky:** Thank you Cherish and thank you for all the work that you do on this subject.

**Cherish:** Thank you.

**Vicky:** So while Cherish is keen to try ploughing in the fields one land girl job that I wouldn't really want to do is clearing rodents off the farms. In a copy of the Land Girl magazine, I found this intriguing account from an L. Clark, who was based in Leicestershire:

**Reader:**

“One of the estate men and I got the car in running order and took it about half a mile to a field where the barley stacks were, and leaving the engine running, fitted a length of rubber tubing (similar to a garden hose) on to the exhaust pipe. Next we placed the far end of the tube right in one of the many rat holes. Arming ourselves with sticks we waited till the poisonous fumes from



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the exhaust pipe wound their way into the underground labyrinths of the rats' homes. Suddenly, out popped a brown head with two beady eyes. Bash! One more of Hitler's helpers was removed; only a little helper maybe, but one who can cause a great deal of damage to our country's corn supply.”

**Vicky:** This woman clearly knew the value of her work and its place in the wider war effort. It's a funny account, but it's underscored by the certificate that land girls received from the Board of Agriculture during the First World War. The certificate reads: “Every woman who helps in agriculture during the war is as truly serving her country as the man who is fighting in the trenches, on the sea, or in the air.”

We can learn more about many of these women from their index cards. This is a unique collection of records held at the National Archives. These records focus on the land girls in England and Wales from 1939 to 1945, and contain basic information, such as name, date of birth, county of employment and lists their pre-war work. These index cards are one vital piece in building a full picture of the rich social history of the Land Army, and women’s lives in wartime more generally.

Occasionally an index card might include a comment relating to the woman’s previous experience. The card of Violette Beryl Clifford notes that she had worked on a chicken farm and had childhood holidays on an Essex smallholding. Amy Rosina Hope’s card lists her occupation as looking after ‘pedigree chickens’, and notes her experience working on her 4.5 acres of land.

You can see how the index cards give us an insight into the lives of people like Violette and Amy. I want to learn more about one of these women, so I’ve asked my colleague Chloe Lee to come onto the podcast. Hi Chloe!

**Chloe Lee:** Hi Vicky.

**Vicky:** Chloe, who are you here to tell me about?

**Chloe:** I want to talk about Amelia King. Her index card says that prior to the Second World War, she lived in Stepney in London and worked as a box maker. However, what the index card doesn’t tell us is how she was turned away when she first applied to the Women’s Land Army in 1943. She was rejected by the Essex branch of the Land Army with the claim that the WLA would find it difficult to find a local farm that would accept her due to the colour of her skin.

**Vicky:** Was this kind of discrimination common? What was the context for it?

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**Chloe:** Yeah, yeah, so in our records we have examples of racial tension during wartime - one cause of racial tension was the arrival of White American servicemen who were used to racial segregation at home. We actually have a report of the cricketer Learie Constantine being racially harassed in a London pub by these white American servicemen. The British authorities, they didn't really want to offend their American allies, nor did they want to promote this racial segregation and it caused quite a few problems, most obviously for Black servicemen.

**Vicky:** So then Amelia found herself trying to work on the land held the war effort but turned away by her fellow Brits for being Black.

**Chloe:** Yes exactly, but there was an outcry. There is a leaflet in The Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick from the Londoners’ Protest Meeting Against Racial Discrimination, which was held at the Holborn Trades Council in 1943. The leaflet says in all-caps “THEY TRIED PUTTING A COLOUR BAN ON HARVESTS”. Underneath that headline we can see a photograph of Amelia, she’s looking directly at the camera. The text next to her reads “This is Amelia King. She was refused work on the land because of her colour. Colour doesn’t prevent her father and brother fighting in the Merchant Navy.” And then a bit further down, “How long is this vicious discrimination to continue?”

**Vicky:** Was there any other kinds of support shown?

**Chloe:** Yeah, yeah. So there was solidarity meetings too, press publicity, which actually caused farmers to reach out and say they would be happy to have Amelia helping on their farms. Questions in Parliament when, in September 1943, the agricultural minister, Robert Hudson said he couldn't really do anything about the discrimination. It's also interesting to note that despite all the attention that Amelia’s case received, our files relating to the Essex branch of the Land Army neglect to record the whole incident. She went to the Hampshire branch from 1943, working at Frith Farm in Fareham until 1944, and then her index cards suggest that she made the move to the London and Middlesex branch before eventually being dismissed on medical grounds. So I think Amelia’s story complicates their understanding of the WLA and the kind of experiences they had. Vicky, are there any other stories of Land Army girls that stick out for you?

**Vicky:** There are so many. I'll start with Jean Herring, who had been a clerk before the war. As a land girl, she was pretty average, pretty ordinary, just working in dairy and fruit production in West Suffolk with her sister, who was also based in the Land Army. Until one day she was on a bus that found itself in the path of a Lancaster bomber aircraft.

**Chloe:** Oh my goodness, that sounds so scary. What happened?

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**Vicky:** So the plane was due to fly to Germany on a bombing raid, but it struggled after takeoff and had to suddenly crash land. As it descended, it looked set to hit the bus carrying Jean and the other passengers on. The bus driver swerved quickly into the grass verge to avoid a collision with one of the plane’s wings. The aircraft crashed in a field alongside the road and immediately burst into flames.

**Chloe:** Wow, what a sight - and Jean?

**Vicky:** She and the driver ran to the burning plane despite all the personal risks to try and rescue the airmen. They rescued two of the crew who were pinned underneath the front part of the wreckage, which was totally ablaze. The fuel and oxygen tanks could have exploded at any moment. But the flames were enough to burn Jean and the bus driver anyway. Sadly, all the airmen died. But Jean and the bus driver were given medals in recognition of their work. And it's actually the recommendations for medals that lead to us having these records in the archive. Jean was clearly really proud of her actions despite being very shaken by the incident.

**Chloe:** Yeah, I can imagine.

**Vicky:** Our files show that she was keen to request her parents attend her medal ceremony. So very proud of what she did.

**Chloe:** I guess we kind of make the assumption that in the Land Army they were removed from most of the action, absolutely extraordinary.

**Vicky:** Yeah and it also just shows the reality of life on the homefront for so many people at the time.

Then I have to tell you about my favourite find, Enid and Dorothea. First, let me describe a photograph. It was printed in The Land Girl magazine in 1941. And it shows a woman in farm boots holding an enormous carrot. She looks kind of astonished by the size of it. Underneath the photo is a letter saying the woman is Dorothea Haynes, and that her carrot weighs four pounds and four ounces, which is two kilograms. The letter was sent from little Eversden in Cambridgeshire, by Enid Barraud (that’s how we think you pronounce her name). That's how we think we pronounce her name. So she wants readers of the magazine to know that probably the carrot is a record breaker. Enid writes, “D. Haynes and I share a cottage here, have our own furniture and a cat and a dog and do all our own work and nearly an acre of garden.”

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**Chloe:** She certainly looks really pleased with her carrot.

**Vicky:** It's a lovely picture isn't it.

**Chloe:** It is, it is, and they do sound like quite the pair.

**Vicky:** Yeah, and based on their index cards, census records and articles written by Enid for The Land Girl, we actually know quite a bit about them... We don't fully know the nature of their relationship. But they were clearly very close and took a shared interest in the house and garden, especially their giant carrots! It's always really hard to know about same sex relationships in the archive because there was so much social stigma in the past and, and a fear really about keeping records often about people's own personal lives and relationships. So they were clearly very close, but we can't really say much more than that.

**Chloe:** Right. Thanks, Vicky. I think that's a really important point. We don't really know with what we've got in the archive.

**Vicky:** Enid signed up to the Land Army in 1939, as one of the first thousand recruits. Her index card gives a little more information than usual, noting her previous experience of “farm work, mainly fruits and vegetables” and her wish to do “organising work”.

**Chloe:** And what work did she end up doing in the Land Army?

**Vicky:** Not so much organising work. We know quite a bit about this, because she wrote an article in The Land Girl in June 1940, where she describes being scared of heights when she climbed a ladder to pick plums. She wrote, “I nearly killed myself lugging that ladder about.”

On her second week she had to handle a farm horse — gaining leg muscles in the handling and arm muscles in the horse-raking. She worked on a farm of 200 acres, with wheat, barley, oats, beans and potatoes, plus two cows, fifty pigs, seventy chickens and thirty rabbits. She had to work with the livestock, too, so a huge task for her.

**Chloe:** Sounds like quite a workout too

**Vicky:** Yeah, and she sounds pretty good at the work as well. She wrote this:

**Reader:** I am afraid I laughed a little bitterly when I heard a broadcast about the training of land girls—how they were given I don't know how many hours' technical instruction, etc. I laughed still

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more bitterly, though there was triumph in it too, when I heard a Dorset farmer enumerate some of the jobs you couldn’t ask a woman to do. I had done them all! And the triumph was definitely on top next morning, when my employer commented on the broadcast, and our foreman added, “Ah well, master, we’ve got one in a hundred!”

**Chloe:** So do we know if Enid liked this kind of work?

**Vicky:** Her favourite job was hedging and ditching. And she liked village life: helping to establish a local library service, living with Dorothea and doing the garden together, studying first aid, and even going to the local pub — although she got into trouble from other readers of The Land Girl when she wrote about drinking. People wrote into say they felt a pub was not the place for land girls after 6pm!

**Chloe Lee:** Did she respond to that criticism?

**Vicky:** Yep — she asked if, given their attitudes, these individuals thought she was in the Land Army or the Salvation Army. Anyway, she was pretty happy with her life. In the ‘One of the First Thousand’ article, we’ve already mentioned, Enid wrote “having beaten my typewriter into a ploughshare, I know I shall never now be able to bear going back” — so you asked if Enid liked the work? I think the answer is a definite yes.

**Chloe:** So what happened to her?

**Vicky:** From electoral registers it appears Enid and Dorothea continued to live together up until the 1960s, and possibly beyond that. Enid attempted to get a seat on the local parish council but was unsuccessful. On her death on 26th July 1972, Enid was described as a spinster. Dorothea died 15 years later in 1987; both were still living in Cambridgeshire at the time of their deaths.

**Chloe:** Wow, thanks for sharing these stories. I think they're really helpful in understanding a bit more of the experiences of Land Army girls.

**Vicky:** Absolutely. Thank you for sharing too, Chloe. It's really great to discuss the amazing stories Amelia, Jean, Enid and Dorothea with you. Thanks. Bye.

**Vicky:** The final colleague I want to speak to about the land girls is Katherine Howells. Katherine specialises in visual collections and British social and cultural history. So to add to these stories we’ve been telling of the land girls, Katherine can talk about the images that represented them. Hi Katherine, great to have you here!

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**Katherine Howells:** Hi, great to be here.

**Vicky:** Can you give me an overview of the visual collections to do with the land girls?

**Katherine:** Yes, it’s mainly a story of communications — the official means of the government recruiting women into the Land Army but also keeping the population informed about what they were doing. So what we hold at The National Archives are basically lots of posters.

**Vicky:** Can you show me and describe some of them?

**Katherine:** Yeah, so the first poster we're looking at here shows a photograph of a smiling land girl sitting in a field, bottle feeding a lamb with a dog lying beside her gazing up at her. It uses the common slogan 'Food Comes First' 'Join the Women's Land Army and win the Battle for Bread'. And I think this one is a great example of the kind of rose-tinted view of farming life that the government wanted to communicate to potential recruits. It also I think deliberately portrays the woman in a fairly traditional feminine and caring role on the farm.

But on the other hand we have another poster with the same slogans, which is quite different. Here we see a really striking image of a land girl sitting, driving a piece of farm machinery - and it seems very modern, it’s a partially coloured photograph in bright blue and yellow. The land girl, she's taking on the kind of farming responsibility which was at first considered far less suitable for a woman to be doing. But of course many women in the Land Army did drive farm vehicles and use heavy machinery, and this was pretty ground-breaking at the time and something which many land girls really enjoyed doing! So this poster is clearly tapping into this desire, presenting a scene of strength and independence and promoting a kind of more exciting and liberating new activity for potential recruits.

But one important thing to bear in mind about recruitment materials is that they were not only trying to *attract* women to join the Land Army, but at the same time, they acted to promote their services to potential employers i.e. farmers, who were usually male. So looking at this third poster, this one is much more traditional in design, it's an illustration showing a beaming woman holding the reins of a horse in what seems to me to be quite an idyllic pastoral scene. Crucially there's also a farmer gesturing to her with his pipe and saying 'we could do with thousands more like you...' I think this one is really interesting because the woman is presented in quite a traditionally feminine way - pretty innocent and sweet but also competent and effective in her job. Perhaps the designer was attempting to depict the land girl in a way that didn't challenge gender norms too much and made the idea of taking on a land girl as an employee seem more appealing, particularly to more

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traditionally minded farmers.

**Vicky:** Thank you for describing those. Where would these kinds of posters have been displayed?

**Katherine:** So they would have been displayed in all sorts of places really - on walls in public buildings and sometimes in the street, in shop windows, or anywhere where they could be displayed. Often they were used in exhibitions so often on exhibition and recruitment stands which were set up to drum up support and interest.

**Vicky:** And did we have any idea of how useful or successful these images were?

**Katherine:** It's always quite difficult to tell how well posters like these actually succeeded. And this is partly due to the fact that the posters were just one of many types of media which contributed to the recruitment drive. There were also recruitment events, exhibits, leaflets, films, radio programmes, and of course the simple word of mouth, which actually may have been the most impactful.

But I think it's fair to say that the recruitment drive was successful overall. By autumn 1941 more than 20,000 women had volunteered.

But what’s interesting about image. In terms of the image of the land girl that all these posters and various other media projected, it seems that a lot of people had confusing ideas about who the land girls were.

Here’s a quote from the editor of The Land Girl magazine about publicity about the Land Army: “A study of the mountain of Press cuttings leaves one baffled by the variety of vision of people who write to the papers. Some see the Land Army as a solid mass of young Amazons tossing the bull with one hand and throwing hundredweight sacks around with the other; some have a vision of pale, anaemic females trying to do impossibly heavy tasks in appalling conditions; and others fear all land girls as dangerous and brightly-painted houris luring the innocent farmer from his happy home.”

**Vicky:** Wow, so quite a complex and different ideas there about what the land girl was. Did any famous artists make work about land girls?

**Katherine:** Yeah, definitely. There's one particular, one really gorgeous painting by Laura Knight, commissioned by the Ministry of Information again for publicity purposes. It depicts a woman ploughing a field with two horses.

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It’s in watercolour and gouache with charcoal underdrawing and its really quite atmospheric, not triumphant, like some images we see but showing the hard work that the land girls went through.

Laura Knight was a very successful British artist who, by the time she was commissioned to create this piece, was already very famous and popular. She also had experience of working on farms gained during the First World War, so she certainly knew the subject well. She had clear opinions on how land girls should be presented in order to promote their work most effectively

**Vicky:** You're right. It's a really, really visually impressive piece of work. We have the original of that in our collection. That's amazing. Do you know what size it is?

**Katherine:** Yeah. Yeah. So it's amazing to have the original. And yeah, it's quite a large poster. It's bigger than some of the others Land Army posters we have. It's probably about a meter high. So it's kind of large poster size. So yeah, it's even more impactful in person.

Yeah, and there's actually a letter from Laura Knight that we have in the collection. It's in her contract file with the ministry, Ministry of Information, where she writes: “That there should be one girl only with the plough is important, for it seems that farmers will not engage girls as a rule for that work as it is considered too expensive because they say it take 2 girls to work in place of one man, but there are girls such as this one who can manage a plough on her own, and she cuts as straight a furrow as any man.”

**Vicky:** These images highlight the ways women and womanhood were represented as part of the war effort, I guess that must have influenced the way people thought about women in the Land Army.

**Katherine:** Yes, but the land girls did not always agree on how they should be depicted! The editors of The Land Girl magazine changed the cover art of the magazine over the years using designs contributed by readers. And this gives us a little insight into how people thought about the way they were being depicted.

One of the first illustrations they had, it was a humorous sketch of a land girl holding a bucket and looking with a kind of confused expression into the face of a cow. So it was quite a funny, funny image. Then in October 1940 they changed this to another image that was submitted by a land girl, a lot more idealistic with a silhouette of a land girl, with her hair flying in the wind.

They published a piece of correspondence where a land girl criticises the new cover art - interesting from a representation perspective. The letter writer, Muriel Solly, said:



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**Readers:**

“I do enjoy the Land Girl. My friends do, too, so my copy has a hard life! I was a little sorry that the cover was changed, for I liked the laugh-against-ourselves effect of the old one. Whenever I just glance at the new design I think of the seaside, not the country!!! Aren’t the dungarees a trifle too bell-bottomed?”

**Katherine:** Oh, and one more thing on images. The Land Girl carried cartoons, and there’s one I really have to mention. It’s from December 1940, and entitled “Popular misconceptions”.

It shows on the left the ideal view of the land girl labelled 'as we hope we look': smiling in the sunshine, wearing fashionable sweater and jodpurs and an hourglass figure. And then on the right we have another image labelled 'as we generally do look': standing in the rain, wearing dungarees, covered in filth and with a sour expression.

Interestingly the cartoon is signed by M. Fedden, Women's Land Army number 22675. This was Mary Fedden, who had recently graduated from the Slade School of Fine Arts in 1936 before joining the Land Army. After the war she continued her successful art career and even created a mural for the 1951 Festival of Britain.

**Vicky:** What a great depiction that is showing the misconceptions. There's such a contrast in the two figures that are presented.

Thanks for joining me today, Katherine. You've provided so many interesting insights about the perception of land girls at the time and I think it really helps us add to the story that we've been learning about.

**Katherine:** Thank you. It's been lovely to talk about it.

**Vicky:** Looking through these old posters, index cards and magazines, you can really get a sense of what it was like to be a land girl during the war. And we can remember just how hard it must have been — cut off from friends and loved ones, worrying about the war, and having to do work - often very physical work - you’d never done before.

Here’s one letter I wanted to share, from a woman called Dorys who was sent to work the land in Cumberland. She wrote into The Land Girl magazine hoping to find more like her.

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**Reader:**

Dear Madam, if you start a correspondence corner, will you please insert my name and address. I hope you do, as I am pretty lonely up here, and would love to correspond with some other members. With best wishes for the success of your magazine, which I always enjoy. Yours faithfully, Dorys F. Wainwright

**Vicky:** I hope that by telling the stories of the fascinating women in the Land Army, like Dorys, we’ve busted some myths and honoured those who kept the nation fed and on its feet during wartime.

I wanted to end with a song written by Joan Sutcliffe, a land girl in Denbighshire:

**Reader:**

A Gardener’s Song

I do not drive the tractor,  
I do not speed the plough,  
I doubt if I could even squeeze  
A teardrop from a cow.

’Tis in the quiet garden  
I toil away the hours  
To raise the nation's food supply,  
Not merely gather flowers.

My nose is quite as freckled,  
As horny as my palm,  
As painful my sciatica  
As any on the farm.

Barehanded now, the woodlouse  
I squash with deadly aim;  
I've turned the hosepipe on myself  
And tumbled through a frame.

Although the press ignores us,  
The public thinks as duds,

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How would they like their Sunday beef  
Without its greens and spuds?

So when you cook your carrots,  
Your onions and your leeks,  
Thank us, who not unworthily  
Display the Land Girl’s breeks.

In Britain's glorious future,  
Secure from threat of war,  
The generations now unborn  
Cry, “Grandma, tell us more

Of what you did when Britain siege  
The Nazis hordes confounded.”  
“I'm one of those who helped to Dig  
For Victory—and found it!”

**Vicky:** Thanks for listening to On The Record from The National Archives. To find out more about The National Archives, follow the link from the episode description in your podcast listening app. Visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk](http://nationalarchives.gov.uk). to subscribe to On the Record at The National Archives so you don’t miss new episodes, which are released throughout the year.

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Finally, thank you to all our experts who contributed to this episode. This episode is an Aunt Nell Production for The National Archives. Written, edited, and produced by Tash Walker and Adam Zmith. Readers were Natalie Doto, Sarah-Jane Todd, Elouise Farley and India Latham.

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You’ll hear from us soon!

**TRAILER TRANSCRIPT**

READER:

There are many women’s armies,  
But none do work so grand  
As they plough and sow and reap  
And mow – our Women on the Land.  
[Catalogue ref: MAF 59/2]

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad: This is On the Record at The National Archives: uncovering the past through stories of everyday people.

READER:

06.30am.... Cheese-making to me is quite the most interesting creative work I have ever tried, and is a very satisfying occupation after having sat on an office stool and pushed a pen for thirteen years.

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad: Muck-spreading, rat-gassing, carrot-pulling — all in a day’s work for a land girl!

Chloe Lee:

She certainly looks really pleased with her carrot.

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad:

It’s a lovely picture isn’t it.

Chloe Lee: And they do sound like quite the pair.

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad:

If you’ve heard of the land girls, you’ll probably know them as plucky young women who rolled up their sleeves and kept Britain’s farms running during the Second World War.

I’m Vicky Iglkowski-Broad is a Principal Records Specialist in Diverse Histories.

I want to plough the stories of the land girls, using some of the special collections we hold here in

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Kew at the National Archives.

**READER:**

Early afternoon... Off comes the apron and on goes the khaki coat, and I sally forth once more to such seasonal jobs as loading and fetching hay and corn, horse raking and turning, calf rearing, pig feeding, gardening, poultry keeping, muck spreading, and all work complementary to the rear end of a cow.

Cherish Watton: I think I would have liked to have learned how to plough. I feel that learning to drive a tractor was so novel for many land girls who didn't have the opportunity to learn to drive at the time.

Vicky Iglkowski-Broad: My colleagues will be coming into the studio to tell me the stories they've found in old issues of The Land Girl magazine, microfiche copies of alphabetical index cards that contain basic information of individual land girls, and the Women's Land Army Handbook.

The episode is coming soon, so hit follow or subscribe wherever you listen

