

Sheila Speak Dornoch

Sheila Broadbent, as she then was would never have joined the Women's Land Army had it not been for her poor eyesight.

Back in 1941, when she was 18, and with Britain at war, she wanted to sign up with the Women's Royal Air Force, but was summarily rejected following an eye test. She recalls, "I had to pass a medical for the WRAF and they just whipped my specs off my face and told me to read down the board. Well, I couldn't even see where the board was! They said 'I'm sorry' so I thought, I'll join the Land Army. Your eyesight didn't matter there."

So began, almost by accident rather than design, three golden years for Sheila - years which are still etched in minute detail in her memory despite the passage of well over half a century. Now an 85-year old widow living in, Dornoch, she is known by her married name as Sheila Speak. She says: "It was a long time ago, but I remember every bit of it. You don't forget."

She has had even more cause to reminisce recently because of the arrival by post at her bungalow of the Women's Land Army Badge and certificate. The award of the commemorative badge follows decades of campaigning by former land girls to get formal recognition of their contribution to the war effort. The WLA had 80,000 members at its peak in 1943.

Sheila originally hails from Greenfield near Oldfield - not far, she points out, from Saddleworth Moor, scene of the notorious moors murders. Her mother was a nurse and the first person to leave the area to serve in France during the First World War. Her dad worked in a woollen mill.

Sheila was one of 34 girls from Lancashire sent by the Land Army to help the war effort in Wrexham, North Wales. They were instructed to bring with them their national health and unemployment insurance cards, medical cards, gas masks, ration books and clothing coupons.

Sheila left her gas mask on the train and went through the war without it. Thankfully she never had to experience a gas attack. The girls were fortunate to be billeted not at a Land Army hostel but at a Royal Ordnance Factory hostel at Rhosnessney, near Wrexham.

There they occupied one block, with the other blocks home to chemists and boffins working at a nearby underground munitions factory. Sheila was later to plough the ground on top of the factory. She recalls sitting down to dinner with the factory workers who handled nitroglycerine. They used to come into the canteen and they were yellow. Their faces were yellow.

We would sit there all bronzed and healthy from having been out in the fresh air and sunshine. The accommodation was rudimentary but the girls each had their own small rooms fitted out with a pretty hard bed, wardrobe and small dressing table. However, the hostel did have other attractions.

We were very, very lucky in where we were billeted and had lots of advantages; we wouldn't have got in an ordinary Land Army hostel, says Sheila. The hostel was lovely. It was like a holiday camp and had a dance hall and a concert hall. It really was a great place to be. Wrexham Garrison was just down the road and the Royal Fusiliers were billeted there! The only downside was that, at the Land Army hostel you got double rations, but we didn't.

A week after arriving at the hostel. Sheila was given a rudimentary driving test and told she was to be an official Land Army driver. She recalls: "This chap came to see us and saw that I had taken my bike with me. He must have thought. 'she knows her way about the roads', and so he put me in a van and said that I would do." From then on she drove the rest of the girls to the various farms where they worked and later picked them up again. She would also be called on to transport machinery and other equipment to outlying farms.



She says: "I drove various vehicles and eventually also heavy goods vehicles. I could take a car to pieces in those days. The vehicles were ex-army and somewhat temperamental. I would often get a flat tyre in the middle of nowhere".

"A lot of the farms did not have much in the way of machinery those days, so I would have to deliver anything that was needed. One time I drove miles into the hills with sheep dip. There were six shepherds who lived away up there and could only speak Welsh. They looked after around 1000 sheep. If anyone deserved a medal then it was their three sheep dogs who took those sheep off the mountains".

The girls worked a 48 hour week and were paid 38 shillings, out of which was deducted £1 for their board and lodgings. Overtime was payable at the rate of ninepence ha'penny an hour. When not driving, Sheila worked at various agricultural jobs. She spent her first month in the Land Army picking strawberries and says: "I was freezing and never wanted to see a strawberry again. You couldn't see the end of the field, it

was so big." For 18 months she accompanied a young farmer who travelled round various farms with a threshing machine. On her first day in this post, she was the target of a fellow worker's devilish sense of humour.

"I used to work on the box of the machine, feeding corn through the thresher. On my first day I was standing on the box when this big hulk of a fellow jumped up and put a clutch of dead mice down my front. How I screamed!" The farmer came up and knocked him straight off the box. A fortnight later I was flinging rats about myself!

Sheila worked with United States soldiers and also Italian prisoners of war. She recollects that the "yanks" always tried to drive her off the road while the Italian POWs headed back for their billets as soon as it started raining leaving the Land Army Girls to work on.

Sheila joined the Land Army in 1941 and left in 1944 after she got married and became pregnant. Her husband died when their daughter was only seven months old and she remarried. They went on to have a son, Steve. The family lived initially in Sheila's home town of Greenfield but later spent 11 years in Middlesex and 17 years in Whitley Bay, Northumberland. Sheila and Lawrie used to holiday in Scotland and moved to Dornoch to live in 1982. In a lifetime spanning 85 years, three years is not a long time, but Sheila has never forgotten anything about her time in the Land Army.

She says: "We worked hard and it wasn't always sunny weather, but I had a wonderful, wonderful time. I loved every minute. It was a happy time. The camaraderie was brilliant. Everybody was brilliant in those days and I made a lot of friends

There are very few of us left. My best friend died not that long ago. She married a farmer and never left Wrexham."



Sheila Speak, with her Women's Land Army Badge and certificate.

Sheila acknowledges that recognition for the efforts made by the Land Army has been a long time in coming. The certificate she received with the badge states: "The Government wishes to express to you its profound gratitude for your unsparing efforts as a loyal and devoted member of the Women's Land Army / Women's Timber Corps at a time when our country depended upon you for its survival." She says: "It's quite nice to get it. It is a bit late, but I never thought anything about being recognised at the time".

Everybody was just doing their bit. There was a group of young lads near us who worked down the coal mines, the Bevin Boys they were called. They sang as they went to work every day. They were wonderful. They didn't get much recognition.

*Sheila being Presented
with her
Land Army Medal
by
Flower Thomson*

