

Bless 'Em All: Life in the Women's Land Army at Lubenham Leicestershire by Pat Fox

The 1939 -1945 war changed the lives of everyone, including civilians. Everyone felt compelled to "to do their bit". For Pat Fox, living in a Derbyshire coalmining village at the outbreak of war, it meant joining the Women's Land Army. Aged 17 in 1943 she came to Lubenham where she has lived ever since.

Britain could not have survived without the army of young women who volunteered to work on the land with no training - they learnt on the job – replacing the men who were called up. They did everything with only the lifting of 2 cwt (100 kg) sacks beyond their remit. The wartime plough-up campaign not only turned Welland Park into a food growing area but had exposed to the soil for the first time for 500 years the grasslands of Leicestershire. It needed people to work these newly cultivated lands and this was supplied by the girls of the Women's Land Army.

The hard work and long hours (at one time she worked for six weeks without a day's break), the cold, limited food, cramped living conditions and personal wartime sorrows are contrasted with the friendship amongst the girls, and with the British and American service men in the village pubs, and with relaxation in the cafes and cinemas of Market Harborough.

This account is very readable, being in short sections, each with a theme such as threshing or driving tractors, or with particular incidents like the day they refused to work asking the Leicester Mercury to publicise the poor food they were given, or when their bicycles were stolen whilst they worked on growing vegetables in the erstwhile flower beds of Welland Park. It records the mid 20th century coming of mechanised agriculture with tractors having to knock down gate posts to gain access to fields.

This book is a reminder of how we have changed: corn on the cob was experienced only from food parcels sent by the family of an American serviceman; cottages were without inside sanitation. Four girls to one cubicle in their wooden hut today would be seen as over crowding, but to one of ten children from a miner's cottage the contrast was less. Standards of living, of health and safety, the quantity and variety of everyday food types have all increased greatly. But leaving bicycles unlocked as a normal procedure is unknown today as is the unquestioned cycling of 7 or more miles for a hard manual days work. We have lost the spontaneity and accepted - simplicity of life and perhaps the camaraderie of work and leisure.

As an account of real life this well illustrated, dip-into-able, book has much to offer with much to ponder on. It is the first book to be published by the Market Harborough Historical Society and is a worthy social account of one particular time and place: the life of land girls in the 1940s in the Market Harborough area.

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