

Object: Women's Land Army boot

Object Number: STMEA:1998-43.2a

Researcher details: Ellie Alexander, Volunteer

These boots were made for farming



Worn by donor Mrs S. J. Rogers, these boots were vital to her 10 year service in the Women's Land Army in Derby and Suffolk. Created in 1917, the WLA saw the first foray of women into male dominated industries and the start of their contribution to the war effort.¹ However it was not until the Second World War that female labourers were fully utilised, and this owed largely to the sexism which pervaded Britain during the early 20th century. Even in the 1930s, the private sphere was where women were expected to reside. Although nearly five million women in the UK did work, their wages were less than that of their male counterparts doing the same jobs and they would be expected to leave upon marrying or giving birth to their first child.² Still

¹ Women's Land Army Collections - The MERL [Internet]. The MERL. 2020 [cited 10 September 2020]. Available from: <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/womens-land-army-collections/>

² BBC - History - British History in depth: Women Under Fire in World War Two [Internet]. Bbc.co.uk. 2020 [cited 11 September 2020]. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/britain_wwtwo/women_at_war_01.shtml

considered second class citizens, they lacked much of the freedom which men enjoyed and were not taken seriously. Even during the initial years of the Second World War, there was a reluctance from the government to encourage the employment of women, despite high levels of female unemployment in 1940.³ Men were perceived as the stronger sex, and there were many doubts that women could handle much of the manual labour required to cover for the men fighting in the war. Coupled with the belief that females were overly emotional, it is easy to see why there was a hesitance in asking for their help. It was only due to the dire situation of Great Britain's agricultural dependence on imports that there was little other choice than to enlist women and grow more food locally to prevent them from becoming starved out.⁴ This was also compounded by the belief that farming was the work of men and that women ought to remain clean and feminine, not out working in the fields. With gendered sphere ideology becoming firmly implanted into society, women began to retreat more and more into the home. Technological advancements further drove women out of agricultural work, with an understanding of chemistry required for the production of fertiliser.⁵ As they were not given the same educational opportunities as their male counterparts, such subject knowledge lay outside of the female realm, further compounding the belief that the farm was no place for a woman.

Despite such prejudices and concerns, Land Girls took on tasks such as scything and working with heavy horses and cattle, using mogul tractors and cultivators. Over 80,000 women proved not only their dedication to the war effort, but their equal abilities on the farms, dispelling myths about their overly feeble nature and inability to be effectively aid the home front.⁶ Such prejudices and the perpetuation of sexism could be seen as fake news itself, and so the mere existence of the WLA served to erode such views. The organisation also played a role in the spreading of their own news via 'The Land Girl', a magazine created to unite the female agricultural workers.⁷ This allowed the creation of news and communication between women all over the UK and eventually went on to become funded by the

³Smith H. The Womanpower Problem in Britain during the Second World War. *The Historical Journal*. 1984;27(4):926.

⁴ Collingham L. *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food*. New York: Penguin Press; 2011, 67-69

⁵ Davidoff Leonore Davidoff, Hall Catherine. *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, rev. Ed. New York: Routledge, 2002, 274.

⁶ Vivian Edith Broad (née Henning) - Women's Land Army.co.uk [Internet]. Women's Land Army.co.uk. 2020 [cited 16 September 2020]. Available from: <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/vivian-edith-broad-nee-henning/> ; Catalogue View | Suffolk Heritage Direct [Internet]. Dswebhosting.info. 2020 [cited 17 September 2020]. Available from: [http://www.dswebhosting.info/Suffolk/SRODServe/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Site31&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqSearch=\(RefNo==%27K681%2F2%2F4%2F5%27\)](http://www.dswebhosting.info/Suffolk/SRODServe/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Site31&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqSearch=(RefNo==%27K681%2F2%2F4%2F5%27)) ; The women of the Second World War [Internet]. GOV.UK. 2020 [cited 17 September 2020]. Available from: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/the-women-of-the-second-world-war>

⁷ The Land Girl (WW2) - Women's Land Army.co.uk [Internet]. Women's Land Army.co.uk. 2020 [cited 20 September 2020]. Available from: <https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/the-land-girl-ww2/>

Ministry of Agriculture.⁸ It allowed women to tell their own stories of their experiences and fostered a sense of community. However printed publications were not the only way in which news was shared, as this was something that was further facilitated on the farms and fields themselves. The WLA Volunteers were posted at assigned locations which were not always near their local area, leading to the mixing of women from all over Britain. Working and living in such close quarters not only blurred the lines between the public and private sphere, but fostered friendships and the sharing of stories and news which would often make its way back to local towns after the women returned home. Therefore the WLA was essential in the spreading of information as it facilitated the opportunity for discussion.

Whilst the female contribution to the war effort didn't lead to immediate emancipation with men returning to their jobs after the war, it did encourage further equality through clothing. Accounts from former workers detailed the baggy trousers and big coat, emphasising the practical nature of the outfits which starkly contrasted the usual feminine attire of the period, with even the Women's Royal Navy Service offering skirts and fitted jackets.⁹ The more masculine nature of the clothing was even criticised in the media as being 'far from glamorous'.¹⁰ This reflects the potential fear that women would be changed by the war through these new methods of dress, much like their bodies had as manual labour led to an increase in strength and muscles.¹¹ In spite of such criticisms, the inclusion of trousers in their uniform was particularly revolutionary, as they were still uncommon during the 1940s, and for some women it was the first time they had ever worn trousers.¹² Wearing clothing which was still mostly limited to men allowed for the blurring of gender spheres by reducing the visual representation of femininity. Therefore the boots were important in terms of practicality, but also symbolism, for they represented greater equality and freedom of activities which women were allowed to perform.

⁸ The Land Girl (WW2) - Women's Land Army.co.uk [Internet]. Women's Land Army.co.uk. 2020 [cited 20 September 2020]. Available from:

<https://www.womenslandarmy.co.uk/archive-material/the-land-girl-ww2/>

⁹ WOMEN'S ROYAL NAVAL SERVICE. NOVEMBER 1942, ADMIRALTY. UNIFORMS OF THE WRNS. [Internet]. Imperial War Museums. 2020 [cited 23 September 2020]. Available from:

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205265770>

¹⁰ "Sad Farewells to W.L.A.: Regrettable Despite Need for Economy," Farmers' News Letter, Devon and Exeter Gazette, November 24, 1950.

¹¹ Summerfield P, Crockett N. 'You weren't taught that with the welding': lessons in sexuality in the second world war. Women's History Review. 1992;1(3):446

¹² Lucy Shanks, interview by Kate Arnold-Forster, October 19, 2005, transcript, Museum of English Rural Life.

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[http://www.dswebhosting.info/Suffolk/SRODServe/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Site31&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqSearch=\(RefNo==%27K681%2F2%2F4%2F5%27\)](http://www.dswebhosting.info/Suffolk/SRODServe/dserve.exe?dsqIni=Dserve.ini&dsqApp=Site31&dsqDb=Catalog&dsqCmd=show.tcl&dsqSearch=(RefNo==%27K681%2F2%2F4%2F5%27))

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