



The Women's Land Army by Ian Everest

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Ian gave us a fascinating and factually rich account of the Women's Land Army (WLA), an interest of his that developed around 1980. Indeed, his own mother had joined the organisation in March 1943. Most of us today think of the WLA as being instigated to serve the needs of the Second World War. In fact, its origins can be traced back to the dark days of the Great War when the bad harvest of 1916, combined with severe shipping losses, threatened Britain with starvation and collapse. Under the auspices of the suffragette Mrs Talbot and her assistant, Gertrude Denman of WI fame, the WLA was created in 1917 by the newly formed women's branch of the Board of Agriculture, acquiring 6000 members by the end of that year. After the Armistice, the WLA was finally disbanded in Oct 1919.

Resurrection came in Apr 1939 with the prospect of war. Miss Denman led the organisation, using her own skills and knowledge of the countryside to make it as appealing and effective as possible. Former prejudices had subsided to some extent but farming hadn't really progressed since the previous conflict. By 1943 there were 63000 land girls who, with the aid of lease lend items such as tractors, made a big difference to Britain's ability to feed its self. After the war, the organisation gradually wound down until its closure in Oct 1950.

Many interesting pictures brought home to us the conditions that were endured by the girls. A sister organisation, the Women's Timber Corp was also covered, whose members had to cope with particularly harsh conditions and arduous work. We were very fortunate to have two ladies in the audience, representing each of the organisations. They were able to add some of their own experiences and had brought some of their own photos too. The biggest surprise for most was to learn that only a very belated token of recognition was given to the girls, in stark contrast to those in the ATS or WRENS.