

Left out in the cold: Village women and agricultural labour in England and Wales during the First World War

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‘Left out in the cold: Village women and agricultural labour in England and Wales during the First World War’

In October 1917 a campaign was launched to widen the scope of leisure opportunities available to the 6,000 or so members of the recently formed Women’s Land Army (WLA), amidst concern that life in the countryside was unappealing to the mostly town-bred recruits. It elicited a rather scathing response from one anonymous correspondent to *The Times*, who suggested that the increasing attention paid to the WLA was doing damage to the reputation of the rural woman worker. Village women, the correspondent argued, had shown themselves to be ‘good housekeepers, good citizens, and good patriots’ through their labour on the land, which saw them going ‘forth into the fields ... in all kinds of weather’. They had, however, ‘been much left out in the cold in the bestowal of encomiums and encouragement’.¹ By highlighting the divisions between the relatively small number of uniformed, trained and full-time ‘imported’ women of the Land Army and the much larger teams of poorly remunerated local women workers, the letter pointed to a growing disparity between the way that female labour on the land was recruited, rewarded and recognized by 1917. It was a trend that continued throughout the remainder of the war, and has persisted in the ways that women’s agricultural war work has been remembered since 1918. This article aims to redress this imbalance. It revisits the empirical evidence to present a new assessment of the level of female labour on the land. It demonstrates that seasonal and regional variation, traditional patterns of work and local labour demands all continued to shape women’s agricultural employment during the war. It is argued that the recent historiographical focus on the WLA has led historians to sideline the extensive use of resident female labour by farmers. The article offers reasons for this neglect, and its ramifications for the broader history of women’s work on the land in the First World War.

¹ ‘The Village Woman’, *The Times*, 2 October 1917

In their striking uniforms of khaki breeches, overcoats and boots, the WLA, formed in January 1917, aroused much discussion. The reaction from members of rural society ranged from bemusement to admiration, peppered with a large degree of consternation. On arriving in the West Dorset village where they were to work, Mildred Hodgson and her companions found themselves 'of intense interest to a row of boys and girls, all seated open-mouthed and wide-eyed ... and from who came ... excited cries of, "Tis the war-workers, you!"'.² Richard Hillyer, a labourer in Buckinghamshire, seemed disappointed that the farm he worked on had no need for 'these new-fashioned land girls', who 'went round in breeches and gaiters like men; and scandalised old people by standing about with their hands in their breeches pockets'.³ Not all farm workers were hospitable. WLA recruit Kathleen Hale was sent to work at a market garden in Barnes on the edge of south-west London in 1918. There she found it 'most embarrassing' to have an audience of male labourers 'mockingly' watching her efforts at ploughing, although it did spur her on to complete the task 'bruised but triumphant'.⁴ Farmers frequently grumbled about the productivity of WLA members, questioning their physical and sometimes psychological capacity for the work. Other members of the farm family, particularly wives and daughters, saw Land Army girls as a disruptive and disturbing presence. Government investigations in Derbyshire in 1918 uncovered instances where the farmer and his wife found it 'undesirable' to have such women living on the farm as they were from 'outside the family' and were of 'little use outside the house or yard'. In Staffordshire Land Girls were accused of using the uniform 'as a passport for parading the streets of the towns and "showing off"'. As a consequence some farmers and their wives thought that the WLA was 'as likely to upset such

² IWM, Private Papers, Docs 2764, Miss Mildred Hodgson

³ Richard Hillyer, *Country Boy* (London, 1966), 181

⁴ Kathleen Hale, *A Slender Reputation: An Autobiography* (London, 1994), 69

labour as they have retained'.⁵ In other regions however the contribution of the WLA was more appreciated. In Norfolk farmers were said to be 'best pleased with their work', in Cambridgeshire Land Girls were 'trusted to work without supervision' by 1918, whilst in Northamptonshire the conclusion was reached that these women were 'very plucky', 'very keen' and 'very patriotic'.⁶

That final assessment, of the WLA as gutsy young women dutifully serving the nation in its time of need, became a central trope in official discourse towards the end of the war, and was cemented in its immediate aftermath. Roland Prothero, President of the Board of Agriculture, drew parallels between the work of the WLA and their male compatriots in the armed forces. In July 1918 he told the House of Commons that these women 'have to make sacrifices, and have to endure privations, which to some extent are comparable to those of their friends and relations at the front', an image he reproduced in his 1925 book *The Land and its People*.⁷ Prothero's successor at the Board of Agriculture, Lord Lee, was also brimming with plaudits in his column for the final edition of the WLA publication, *The Landswoman*, in December 1919. With their 'cheerfulness', 'spirit of comradeship', in their 'attractive costumes' and their 'keen enthusiasm for the work', Land Girls, he argued, had done much 'to brighten the countryside'. He concluded, 'All ranks of the Land Army can look back with pride to their share in developing the home production of food during the war, and they may be assured that their self-sacrificing service will never be forgotten by the Board, by the Government, or by myself'.⁸ Thus whilst he looked at women through a feminine aesthetic, he also placed them in a discourse of economic production, patriotism and sacrifice. This trope was reaffirmed by Meriel Talbot, director of the WLA from 1917, who concluded that young women

⁵ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture. Vol II, Reports of Investigators, 57 and 310

⁶ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports of Investigators, 224, 27 and 236

⁷ House of Commons debate 18 July 1918, vol 108, cc1281; Lord Ernle, *The Land and its People: Chapters in Rural Life and History* (London, 1925), 178

⁸ *The Landswoman*, December 1919, 270

‘certainly gave a good account of themselves’, citing the ‘skill and courage’ of ‘London girls’ in particular.⁹

Although its status as a volunteer civilian force has meant the WLA has often been depicted as the ‘Cinderella’ division of the wartime women’s services, the WLA of the First World War has not been short of academic consideration. Land Army women have been often been configured as symbols of valiant endeavour and wartime patriotism by historians. Carol Twinch argues that faced with ‘often appalling living and working conditions’ members of the Land Army dug into their reserves of pride and performed ‘a necessary but largely unspectacular heroism’.¹⁰ Others contend that the significance of the WLA lays not so much in the work they performed but in the way they changed the perception of women’s role in the countryside. According to Gill Clarke ‘the more public and visible presence of Land Girls had challenged images of womanhood and assumptions about women’s physical capabilities and the suitability of certain farming tasks for them’.¹¹ This has also been interpreted as part of a process of rural rejuvenation. Susan Grayzel suggests that agricultural work was presented not as ‘contradicting fundamental aspects of “femininity”’ but ‘as being essential for the nation, and as providing both the revitalisation of the countryside and the redemption of modern women’.¹² Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant meanwhile claims that joining the WLA was ‘much more than an act of patriotism’ for young women, it was a springboard for personal liberation. Labour on the land, she argues, ‘brought a sense of independence, personal responsibility, and self-assurance’.¹³ The most recent, and by far the most exhaustive account is Bonnie White’s 2014 book *The Women’s Land Army in First World War Britain*. Whereas previous

⁹ Dame Meriel Talbot, ‘The Women’s Land Army in the Great War, 1914-18’ in W. E. Shewell-Cooper, *Land Girl: A Manual for Volunteers in the Women’s Land Army 1941* (Stroud, 2011), 11

¹⁰ Carol Twinch, *Women on the Land: Their Story during Two World Wars* (Cambridge, 1990), 52-3

¹¹ Gill Clarke, *The Women’s Land Army: A Portrait* (Bristol, 2008), 58

¹² Susan R Grayzel, ‘Nostalgia, gender and the countryside: Placing the “Land girl” in First World War Britain’, *Rural History* (1999), 10/2, 155-70 (157)

¹³ Cecilia Gowdy-Wygant, *Cultivating Victory: The Women’s Land Army and the Victory Garden Movement* (Pittsburgh, 2013), 41-2

studies have imposed, to a greater or lesser extent, a patriotic framework, White argues that an evaluation of the WLA need not 'be reduced to a cultural memory of women's patriotic work or wartime nostalgia' but should confront the tensions and conflict inherent in the organisation from its inception. For White the WLA is important because it was 'an organisation that crossed class lines, that simultaneously challenged and reinforced gender expectations, and which was developed and implemented by women both locally and nationally'.¹⁴

The role of the WLA therefore stands prominently in both contemporary narratives and academic accounts of the rural homefront and national food production during the First World War. In recently published popular centenary histories of the war, such as Kate Adie's *Fighting the Home Front*, discussion of women's work in agriculture concentrates exclusively on the WLA.¹⁵ The WLA was, however, as the correspondent to *The Times* in 1917 pointed out, just one strand of women's work on the land, an addition to the thousands of resident village women who also took part in agricultural labour during the war. The contribution of village women to wartime food production has not gone unnoticed by historians; indeed it formed a central part of the analysis carried out by rural historians in the late 1970s and 1980s. Peter Dewey showed that whilst 'the direct importance of the WLA as a source of replacement labour was small', the 'largest source of non-governmental replacement labour was the village woman'.¹⁶ He calculated that across the war as a whole the WLA made up just 5 per cent of replacement labour in agriculture, whereas village women accounted for some 25 per cent.¹⁷ Pamela Horn argued that whilst the Land Army was important, it was 'ordinary villagers who on a full-time and part-time basis had borne the brunt of the additional land work'.¹⁸ The current focus on the WLA has deflected attention away from the work performed by village

¹⁴ Bonnie White, *The Women's Land Army in First World War Britain* (Basingstoke, 2014), 3 and 8

¹⁵ Kate Adie, *Fighting the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One* (London, 2013)

¹⁶ P. E. Dewey, 'Government provision of farm labour in England and Wales, 1914-18', *Agricultural History Review*, 27/2 (1979), 114 and 116

¹⁷ Dewey, 'Government provision of farm labour', 121

¹⁸ Pamela Horn, *Rural Life in England and Wales in The First World War* (Dublin, 1984), 136

women and distorts our understanding of the female agricultural labour force during World War One.

Recent research on Wales has gone some way to remedy this. The analysis of both Donnah E. Lewis and Thomas George has offered a more holistic analysis that is cognisant of different categories of war worker, situating the place of the WLA within a broader assessment of all forms of women's work in agriculture, including the unpaid (and usually unrecorded) labour performed by farmers' female relatives on family enterprises, and the paid labour of local village women.¹⁹ This article builds upon this research. Its focus is on those rural women who undertook paid work for farmers, as it was this group who captured the attention of government agencies and data collectors. Village women workers were far from a homogeneous group however. Although all rural women, whatever their social background, were encouraged to participate in work on the land, it was understood that 'by far the largest and also the most suitable source of labour for the farmer's need' was the working-class village woman, 'the wives and families of the male labourers and other residents'.²⁰ Some of these women had worked on the land before the war, serving largely as a casual and seasonal pool of local labour, although in some regions, such as Northumberland, they were full-time workers. Other local women were new recruits to agriculture, registered as part of the wartime drive to encourage more women to work. Some worked full-time, others part-time; in some regions they were formed into gangs, and sometimes they were joined by additional groups of supplementary labour from a variety of sources such as local schools, universities and towns. The WLA was a distinctive category of recruit, separate from all local women in terms of pay, conditions and accommodation.

¹⁹ Donnah E. Lewis, "'No beginning or end to their working day': Women's agricultural work in Pembrokeshire during the first half of the twentieth century', PhD thesis, University of Aberystwyth, 2014; Thomas George, 'Female agricultural workers in Wales in the First World War', in eds, Maggie Andrews and Janis Lomas, *The Home Front in Britain: Images, myths and forgotten experiences* (Basingstoke, 2014), 92-107

²⁰ IWM, LAND 1/38, Circular letter to the Women's Farm Labour Committees, December 1916

Assessing exactly how many women worked on the land during the war and the types of work they performed, presents a number of difficulties for historians, not least because of the inconsistent nature of the statistical data. A sub-committee appointed at the end of 1918 by the Ministry of Reconstruction to consider the wartime employment of women in agriculture reported a sense of frustration that 'not one set of figures' available to them could 'be reconciled with another'. The result was a lack of 'satisfactory information on the number of women occupied' in agriculture during the war.²¹ Defects in the historical record are of course not unique to agriculture, as women's work was underestimated, misreported or misconstrued in many occupations, and statistical sources are as much products of social and gender ideologies as any other source.²² Nor are problems with the agriculture statistics confined to wartime only. The Victorian census, designed to enumerate full-time, regular occupations, often excluded the sizeable part-time, seasonal and casual female labour force in agriculture.²³ The two sources of official data published prior to the outbreak of war, the 1908 Census of Production and the 1911 Census of Population show a significant divergence. The former, collected by the Board of Agriculture as an addition to its long-established annual June survey of crops and livestock, recorded a total of 100,000 women (all ages) employed on the land in England and Wales, divided between those engaged on a permanent basis (68,000) and those temporarily employed (32,000).²⁴ This was far more extensive than the figures returned by the

²¹ HMSO, Board of Agriculture and Fisheries: Report of Sub-Committee Appointed to Consider the Employment of Women in Agriculture in England and Wales (London, 1919), 29

²² Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 2010), 15; Joyce Burnette, *Gender, Work and Wages in Industrial Revolution Britain* (Cambridge, 2008), 7-8

²³ Edward Higgs, 'Occupational censuses and the Agricultural Workforce in Victorian England and Wales', *Economic History Review*, 48 (1995), 700-16; Celia Miller, 'The Hidden Workforce: Female Fieldworkers in Gloucestershire, 1870-1901', *Southern History*, 6 (1984), 139-61; Nicola Verdon, *Rural Women Workers in Nineteenth-Century England: Gender, Work and Wages* (Woodbridge, 2002), 117-9

²⁴ 1912-13, [Cd. 6277], Board of Agriculture and Fisheries. The Agricultural Output of Great Britain, 18

census three years later, when just 13,245 female agricultural labourers, farm servants and shepherds (aged 10 years and above) were reported.²⁵

The difficulties of data collection, in particular distinguishing between those who worked full-time and those who worked on a part-time or casual basis, and the sometimes-competing interests of the assorted agencies involved in women's work on the land, continued during the war and leaves us with various projections of the level of female agricultural labour between 1914 and 1918. To explore the meaning of these statistics, and the sources of confusion and inconsistency, this article will now proceed on three spatial levels, the national, the regional and the local. The broad trends in women's work on the land across England and Wales will be documented next using data collected by various government branches. A section exploring how female participation in the workforce was shaped by the regional and seasonal nature of agricultural production follows this. The article then drills down to assess how these issues played out in one county. The focus here is Bedfordshire, chosen because the extant records of the committees that supervised the organization of women's work on the land in that county are unusually rich for the First World War. They reveal how national tensions over the recruitment and retainment of women agricultural workers, and between wartime industries competing for labour, encroached at the very local level. How an assessment of agricultural labour relates to the broader debates over women, work and the First World War will form the basis of the conclusion. Why has the WLA dominated accounts of female labour on the land in the First World War and what are the consequences of this for our understanding of women's contribution to wartime agriculture?

II

The War Enquiries branch of the Board of Trade collected the most comprehensive estimates of the numbers of women at work on the land between 1914 and 1918. Popularly known as the Z8 reports,

²⁵ 1911, Occupations (part 2), England and Wales, Vol. X

they have been reproduced in Table 1. The most important point to make first of all is that they were not a headcount of the total workforce. Instead they were extrapolated from regular 3-monthly returns received from a small sample of farmers, no more than two per cent of the farmer population in England and Wales. The sample was drawn principally from large-scale farmers (the average farm size being 340 acres).²⁶ Employers were asked to give details of their labour force in comparison to July 1914, and the Board used the Census of Production returns as the measure of the pre-war labour force. The figures included women enlisted in the Women's National Land Service Corps (from 1916) and the WLA (from 1917), although they were not distinguished from local labour in the returns. We therefore need to treat these estimates with caution. The Board of Trade itself, although confident that 'the returns may be taken as representative', also warned that the figures were 'approximate only'.²⁷

The figures for the first year of the war show the difficulties farmers experienced in attracting and retaining female labour in the face of competition from alternative war industries. Before the war occupational choice for rural girls and women was exceptionally narrow, usually restricted to domestic service or agriculture. Despite its low pay, long hours and close surveillance, service was usually considered more respectable than work on the land, which was tainted by decades of Victorian opprobrium. Viscountess Wolseley recognized this problem in her 1916 publication *Women and the Land*. 'Stealthily', she argued, 'all sorts of false views about women's work upon the land' had 'crept in amongst the working classes'. She continues,

The ideas that are most prevalent are that work upon farms is derogatory to women, that it may be injurious to their health and that their children and homes will be neglected in consequence ... it is not to be wondered at that village women and girls feel it to be derogatory for them to become interested in butter-making or milking cows, and that,

²⁶ Peter Dewey, *British Agriculture in the First World War* (London, 1989), 41-2

²⁷ IWM, EMP 25/10, Report on the state of employment in all occupations in the UK in July 1918, 23

instead of coming forward to learn these things, they prefer to undertake any other work.²⁸

War industries, which were often located in rural or semi-rural locations, upstaged both service and land work because, in the words of the Board of Trade, they were 'more highly paid or more attractive spheres of employment'.²⁹ In contrast to agriculture, munitions and other industrial work benefitted from defined hours of work and pay, along with half-day holidays and no Sunday work. In the districts around Coventry it was reported that the high wages paid by munitions factories 'militates considerably against persuading women to take up farm work', whilst in the far north-west the munitions works at Gretna 'affected the local supply of women labourers'. In Leicestershire the competition for labour came from the hosiery, shoe and engineering industries and had 'a marked effect on labour available for agriculture', whilst in Lincolnshire one farmer complained 'he could not get any girls over 15 years to work on the land today' because of the iron-stone workings.³⁰ Where domestic responsibilities and travel arrangements permitted it, rural women grabbed new opportunities to work in industry: between July 1914 and July 1915 the female agricultural workforce declined by 16,000 across England and Wales as a whole.

²⁸ Vicountess Wolseley, *Women and the Land* (London, 1916), 180

²⁹ 1918, [Cd. 9164], *Employment of Women*, 13

³⁰ 1919 [Cmd. 25], *Reports of Investigators*, 354, 55, 146 and 202

Table 1: The number of women agricultural workers (permanent), Board of Trade estimates, 1914-18

	January	April	July	October
1914	36,000	43,300	57,000	43,662
1915	36,000	44,200	41,000	44,200
1916	39,000	56,700	79,400	59,850
1917	47,000	61,100	87,100	67,431
1918	56,000	68,100	90,900	73,000*

* This figure is for November 1918

Sources: 1918 [Cd. 9164], Employment of Women. Report of the Board of Trade on the increased employment of women during the war in the United Kingdom, 13-4; IWM, EMP 25/6 Report on the Increased Employment of women during the war, with statistics for October 1917; EMP 25/8 Report of the Board of Trade on the Increased employment of women during the war in the UK, with statistics up to April 1918; EMP 25/11 Report on the State of employment in all occupations in the UK on 11 November 1918 and 31 January 1919

There was also a degree of hostility from farmers and farm workers towards the labour of village women at the start of the war. In part this was generated by concern that if women workers were considered a substitute for male labour it would make the position of skilled male workers or farmers' sons vulnerable to the attentions of army recruiters.³¹ However farmers were also initially

³¹ Hilary Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the farm in motion: Labour shortages in the uplands in the Great War', *Rural History* 19, 2 (2008), 201-16

sceptical about the proficiency of village women. Unlike their own wives and daughters, they were not trained in agricultural work, and particularly in regions where women's work had declined considerably in late Victorian times, farmers balked at the idea that women could provide an adequate substitute for male workers in most branches of agriculture. Women in villages were criticized as being too 'well-off' to submit to land work, made financially independent by the receipt of military allowances or rent from temporary lodgers, and were castigated early in the war for their lack of patriotic spirit. In March 1916, a delegation travelled from Berkshire to survey the work being undertaken by women on farms in France, and reported:

The Frenchwomen seemed to accept the carrying on of farm work as their natural share in the winning of the war, and they toiled hard without a murmur. Their attitude was in striking contrast to that of many English village women who drew their separation allowances and saw no reason why they should do their absent husbands' work on the farms.³²

It was not until April 1916 that the number of women at work on the land crept back up to its immediate pre-war level.

By that time two key changes had occurred. Firstly the government, more cognisant of possible labour shortages, had begun a concerted recruitment campaign aimed at channelling what it categorized as the 'patriotism, and energy and capacity for work' that it believed was 'running to waste' amongst village women, but 'for lack of a little organisation'.³³ The result was a village registration scheme overseen by regional Women's War Agricultural Committees (WWACs). By the summer of 1916, 63 committees had been set up, and they had appointed over a thousand district

³² 'A Call to Women', *The Times*, 9 March 1916

³³ IWM, LAND 1/24, How to enrol country women for war service in their spare time

representatives and four thousand village registrars.³⁴ Secondly, faced with a continued outflow of male labour, and with labour shortages really biting in some regions by 1916, farmers became more receptive to the employment of women as an alternative labour force.³⁵

In August 1916 the Board of Trade asked the WWACs to furnish them with a report on the employment of women at the end of that month. By their own admission the WWACs were only able to collate 'very incomplete records'.³⁶ The calculations they published in the summary of the report – 65,497 women registered and 36,572 women working – do not tally with the information provided by the county reports, which show just over 67,000 women registered and 42,722 women working. However, even this is substantially lower than the Board's own estimate of 79,400 for the previous month in 1916 (see Table 1). Flaws in the WWACs data can partly explain the discrepancy. Only 33 out of the 63 committees formed by that date submitted information on the number of women registered in August 1916, with just 29 supplying a figure for those actually at work on the land. Moreover, as the reports from several of the WWACs showed, in some districts there were more women working than were formally registered. In Norfolk 5,635 women were registered with 5,842 working; in the East Riding between 600 and 700 were registered but 982 were working, and in the Kesteven district of Lincolnshire, 599 women were registered but 2,041 were recorded as working.³⁷ In areas where women's work had been usual before the war both women and farmers preferred to keep the process informal, fearful of the prying eyes of the military recruiters, and distrustful of officialdom. In the West Riding it was noted that 'farmers prefer to make their own

³⁴ IWM, EMP 25/2, Report on the increased employment of women during the war with statistics relating to October 1916

³⁵ There is no agreement on how many men left agriculture during the war but see Dewey, *British Agriculture*, 44-6; P. E. Dewey, 'Agricultural labour supply in England and Wales during the First World War,' *Economic History Review* 28, 1 (Feb 1975), 100-112; Bonnie White, 'Feeding the war effort: agricultural experiences in First World War Devon, 1914-17', *Agricultural History Review* 58, 1 (2010), 95-112 and Crowe, 'Keeping the wheels of the farm in motion'

³⁶ IWM, LAND 1/35, Summary of the Work of the WWACs, 4

³⁷ IWM, LAND 1/35, Summary of the Work of the WWACs, 9, 14, and 17

arrangements with casual women workers, and do not avail themselves of the Village Registers', in Hampshire 'both women and farmers' were described as being 'averse to using the register', whilst in Somerset 'many habitual workers' did 'not care to register'. In the Peterborough district women were said to 'object to registration' but were 'willing to work, and in many cases always *have* worked on the land'.³⁸ The traditional use of women as an informal workforce continued in wartime and satisfied both the labour demands of farmers and the domestic responsibilities of women. The Welsh reports suggest women were nervous of being asked to move away from their local areas, demonstrating, as George argues, 'that local ties were as strong as the desire to help the war effort'.³⁹ Many believed that a formal registration process would bring official interference into a customary practice that suited both farmers and workers for different reasons.

If the WWACs under-estimated the extent of female labour in the summer of 1916, the Board of Trade may have done the opposite. It cautioned that their July figures could 'overestimate the number of permanent workers on the land by including among them some casual labourers'.⁴⁰ The Board did collect separate figures for the size of the casual workforce, recording 50,000 casual women workers in July 1914, rising to 90,000 by July 1916, but these cover the whole of Great Britain and cannot be directly comparable to the figures for the permanent workforce reported for England and Wales only. From the middle of the war the level of casual labour began to decline. In October 1917 82,000 casual female workers were recorded but by the summer of 1918 it had fallen back to 65,200 (throughout Great Britain). It was argued this was partly due to a lessened demand in hop and fruit cultivation and to the increased availability of alternative sources of labour for seasonal labour, namely soldiers and prisoners of war.⁴¹ However the Board also thought it was 'probable that some females who were formerly classed as casuals have passed on to regular

³⁸ IWM, LAND 1/35, Summary of the Work of the WWACs, 15, 23, 24 and 18

³⁹ George, 'Female agricultural workers in Wales', 97

⁴⁰ IWM, EMP 25/10, Report July 1918, 24

⁴¹ By the end of 1918 there were around 84,000 soldier labourers and 30,000 POWs working in agriculture. Dewey, 'Government provision of farm labour', 111-3

staffs'.⁴² In contrast, across the second half of the war the number of regular female workers recorded by each quarterly Board of Trade return showed a rise from the previous year, peaking in July 1918, at just over 90,000 (Table 1). The official attitude towards village women had shifted and they had been brought more firmly into the rhetoric of wartime patriotism. As a report in *The Times* in mid 1917 put it:

Women are ready and able to work on the land, however hard and disagreeable it may be. They have heard the country's call. They have answered generously and patriotically the appeal for their help. Those who live in their own homes on the spot have come forward in large numbers. Farmers are glad of their services, and have learnt by experience how useful a woman can be, even if she can only give half a day at a time.⁴³

On the basis of their returns the Board of Trade was able to conclude that the ratio of regular female to regular male worker in England and Wales was 1:5, but for all female workers against all male workers (regular and casuals) it was 1:4.⁴⁴

The data collected by the Board of Trade, either through the Z8 reports or the WWACs, was patchy at best. The same is also true of two further sources of information from the latter stages of the war, the Report on Wages and Conditions of Employment in Agriculture and the War Cabinet reports. The former was set up by the Board of Agriculture at the end of 1917, after the establishment of the Agricultural Wages Boards, and appointed several investigators to examine the general state of farm labour, which they did between January and July 1918. The General Report noted that the 'majority' of counties had seen a large increase in the employment of village women during the war. By the spring of 1918 it suggested there had been an increase of regular female

⁴² IWM, EMP 25/10, Report July 1918, 25

⁴³ 'Women for Farm and Field', *The Times*, 7 June 1917

⁴⁴ IWM, EMP 25/10, Report July 1918, 26

labour on the land of 11 per cent over that of 1917, and 33 per cent on the pre-war figure.⁴⁵ The reports of investigators show that 8,796 WLA recruits and 60,897 village women were working on the land in 1918 but as not all counties reported data, the figures are again likely to be understated.⁴⁶ The War Cabinet figures were released in 1917 and 1918. The report for 1917 warned that returns for the number of women employed in agriculture were not complete but it estimated that some 270,000 women were employed in farm work, on a part or full-time basis.⁴⁷ The report for 1918 went into further detail, drawing a clear distinction between village women and 'imported' women. It stated that around 90,000 village women had been employed before the war, a figure that had risen to 260,000 by early 1918, and to 'at least' 300,000 by September 1918. WLA numbers had risen from just under 6,000 to 16,000 over the same period.⁴⁸

The War Cabinet figures deviate significantly from other wartime statistics. It is not entirely clear whether they refer to full-time or part-time workers or to England, England and Wales or to Great Britain. These categories appear to be conflated at different times. More importantly the provenance of the statistics is somewhat dubious. They were allegedly based upon figures from two sources, the local Labour Exchanges and the Women's Branch of the Food Production Department (FPD), but the Labour Exchanges were little used by farmers, and the Women's Branch recorded only those women officially registered as working on the land. This did not stop Prothero, who, as President of the Board of Agriculture had held a seat in the War Cabinet, restating the figures several times after the war. In a speech to the House of Lords in March 1919 (as Lord Ernle), he argued that the number of women working on the land had increased 'from something like 91,000 at the last census of 1911 to upwards of 300,000' by the end of the war.⁴⁹ In *The Land and its People* he argued that the number of women employed on the land as part-time workers trebled during the war, with

⁴⁵ 1919, [Cmd. 24], General Report, 52-3

⁴⁶ Only 30 counties reported a figure for the WLA and 21 counties for village women.

⁴⁷ 1918 [Cd. 9005], War Cabinet report 1917, 161

⁴⁸ 1919 [Cmd. 325], The War Cabinet. Report for the year 1918, 237

⁴⁹ House of Lords Debate, 18 March 1919, vol 33, cc753-64 (at 759). See also *The Times*, 30 May 1919

‘a conservative estimate’ of 320,000 at work in September 1918, assisted by 16,000 members of the WLA. According to Ernle, the Women’s Branch of the Board of Agriculture therefore ‘had to deal with some 320,000 women actually engaged in agricultural work, scattered over almost every parish in England and Wales’ at the height of the final year of war.⁵⁰ Although Dewey warned many years ago that the War Cabinet figures were, at best, ‘based upon guess-work’, it is these figures, or versions of them, that are also most frequently quoted by historians of the WLA.⁵¹

Taken together what does the wartime data tell us about the level of women’s work in agriculture during the Great War? Firstly, we can echo the conclusion of the sub-committee on the employment of women in agriculture in 1919, that the number of women ‘in fairly regular employment’ on the land in England and Wales as a whole increased during the war.⁵² The majority of these were resident village women, who were joined in the later stages of the war by the WLA. Secondly, it confirms that problems associated with measuring the female agricultural labour force persisted during the war, with a range of organisations and bodies returning disparate and sometimes conflicting, information. This was a long-standing issue that had its antecedence in the pre-war era, and it would continue afterwards, with the extent of the farm labour force remaining difficult to measure accurately after the war.⁵³ Despite the flaws associated with the data however, they can be used to indicate general trends in female wartime agricultural employment. They hint at the difficulties of recruiting women to work on the land: it was only towards the end of the war, in 1917 and 1918, that the level of the permanent female labour force reached its pre-war figure (taking the 1908 Census of Production as the measure). Finally, the data points to two key features

⁵⁰ Ernle, *The Land and its People*, 177 and 179. The Women’s Branch of the Board of Agriculture was created in January 1917 and subsequently transferred to the Food Production Department.

⁵¹ Dewey, ‘Government provision of farm labour’, 116; Clarke, *The Women’s Land Army*, 35 and 38; Twinch, *Women on the Land*, 16-18; White, *The Women’s Land Army*, 8

⁵² HMSO, Report of Sub-Committee, 29

⁵³ Nicola Verdon, ‘Agricultural labour and the contested nature of women’s work in interwar England and Wales’, *Historical Journal*, 52, 1 (March 2009), 109-30

of the wartime female workforce that had been long-standing elements of women's work in agriculture, its regionality and seasonality. These will be explored more fully in the next section.

III

Table 2: The regional increase and decrease in women workers in agriculture, England and Wales, 1914-1918

Percentage increase (+) or decrease (-) in the number of women employed since July 1914								
	Oct	July	Oct	July	Oct	July	Oct	July
	1914	1915	1915	1916	1916	1917	1917	1918
South Eastern	-45.9	-8.0	-45.9	+78.4	+15.9	+65.9	+13.2	+94.2
South Western	-20.7	-8.7	-21.8	+28.8	-0.6	+46.6	+18.6	+65.2
West Midland	-18.5	-12.1	-15.2	+14.4	+3.6	+34.8	+25.6	+38.6
East Midland	+1.9	-8.4	+25.8	+86.2	+35.6	+92.3	+86.9	+157.0
Yorkshire	-8.4	-9.1	-11.8	+21.2	+5.7	+13.6	+0.3	+22.4
North Western	-12.9	-2.6	-3.7	+37.2	+26.8	+51.5	+62.5	+62.4
Northern	-6.5	-4.5	-12.7	+4.4	+2.5	+4.9	+0.9	+15.4
Wales	-6.6	-4.4	-5.1	-7.7	-13.2	+11.7	+8.0	+3.0
England and Wales	-23.4	-7.3	-22.5	+40.0	+5.9	+42.6	+18.3	+59.5

Sources: IWM, EMP 25/2, Report on the increased employment of women during the war with statistics relating to October 1916; EMP 25/5, Report on the increased employment of women during the war, with statistics for July 1917; EMP 25/6 Report on the Increase Employment of women during the war, with statistics for Oct 1917; EMP 25/10 Report on the State of employment in all occupations in the UK in July 1918

Table 2 shows the regional increase and decrease of the regular female agricultural workforce according to the Board of Trade returns every October and July between 1914 and 1918, based on a comparison with the July 1914 figure. Every English region recorded an increase in women on the land by July 1916, compared to the July 1914 figures. The rate of increase differed across districts however 'according to the nature of the work and the alternative openings for women'.⁵⁴ The largest increases came in two regions – the South East and East Midlands – a trend that continued across the remainder of the war. District reports from the South East noted that women's war labour was 'chiefly confined to the lighter and more unskilled' farm work such as hoeing, weeding and harvesting but that women were 'employed in much larger numbers' on such work. In Kent the regular female labour force was particularly high, with three female to every seven male workers, and in Sussex women were 'replacing men in considerable numbers as milkers'.⁵⁵ In the East Midlands, it was the extensive use of female labour in Lincolnshire that largely accounted for the upswing. In the Holland district of that county women had 'always been largely employed', were 'admitted to be expert at much of their work' and as a result were 'a ready-trained reservoir upon which to draw for more continuous labour' during the war.⁵⁶

The situation in Wales was different. Here it was not until July 1917 that the female labour force showed an increase on the July 1914 figure. Even then, and into 1918, the percentage increase

⁵⁴ IWM, EMP 25/6, Report October 1917, 22

⁵⁵ IWM, EMP, 25/10, Report July 1918, 7

⁵⁶ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports by investigators, 158-9

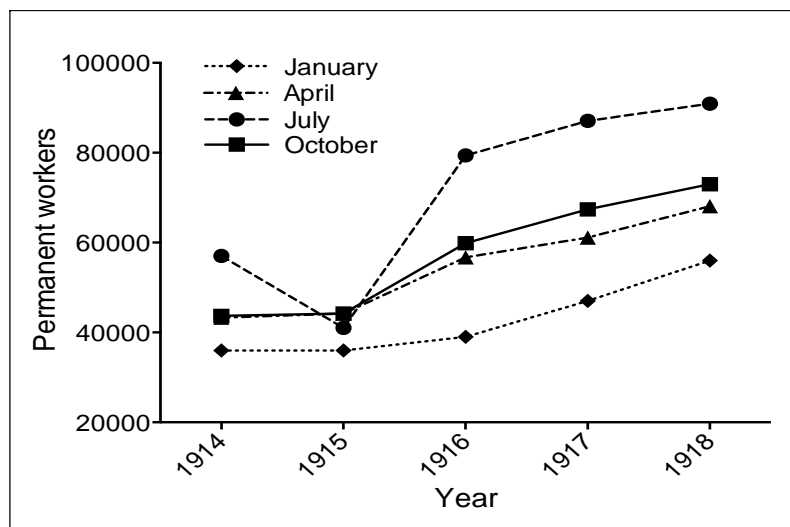
was small. As the Board of Trade report for October 1916 recognized this was due to changes in both supply and demand. Thus although women in Wales were 'employed on the land in considerable numbers in normal times', the local supply of women had 'diminished by the increased demand for their services at higher wages in industrial occupations'. Farmers meanwhile had resorted 'to a less intensive system of cultivation to meet the shortage of irreplaceable male labour.'⁵⁷ The same was also true of the Northern district of England, which had seen a 15.4 per cent increase in female labour by July 1918 against a national average of nearly 60 per cent, and where in counties such as Northumberland women's farm work was 'traditional' and 'customary'.⁵⁸ The less spectacular rises in Wales and the North, as well as in the West Midland and Yorkshire districts, were also because it was usual for labour to be provided by the farmer's wife and daughters, and by female servants hired to live on the farm in these regions. On the small grass farms of the Leek and Cheadle areas of Staffordshire for example, it was found that 'the wives and daughters of farmers and domestic servants' were 'regularly helping with a large part' of the farm work.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ IWM, EMP 25/2, Report October 1916, 15; George, 'Female agricultural workers in Wales', 97-8

⁵⁸ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports of investigators, 249

⁵⁹ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports of investigators, 310

Figure 1: The seasonal pattern of women's work on the land, 1914-18



Source: see Table 1

If we turn to the seasonal pattern of labour, outlined in Figure 1 using the Board of Trade estimates, there is remarkable consistency in the trends with January being the least active month of the year and July the most active, apart from 1915. October saw a decline from the summer peak, although as the figures in Table 2 show it was much less marked in the East Midland and North Western regions than elsewhere. The Board granted that under usual circumstances more women would have been employed in July than in the autumn and winter months, the latter being dominated by tasks such as ploughing which required 'considerable physical strength ... less easily carried on by women than the lighter summer operations'.⁶⁰ Thus women's work during the war was still largely shaped by seasonal demand and by cultural perceptions of female physical capacity.

Useful as they are, the regional statistics provided by the Board of Trade can obscure variation within, as well as between, different districts. Although a 'large number of women' were employed in Lincolnshire for example, in other areas of the East Midlands it was found 'more than

⁶⁰ IWM, EMP, 25/2, Report October 1916, 5

half the farmers reporting employ no women'.⁶¹ Even at the level of the individual county there was considerable divergence in the employment of women on the land, depending on very local patterns of demand and supply. To explore this further we now turn to the records of the Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee.

IV

Following the campaign from the Boards of Agriculture and Trade to promote women's employment on the land, the Women's War Agricultural Committee (WWAC) for Bedfordshire was formed in February 1916. It consisted of an Executive Committee of ten members plus various sub-committees. Mrs Madeline Whitbread chaired it and the Honourable Secretary was Mrs Norah Whitchurch. The county was mapped into 15 discrete districts (as shown below in Table 3), each with a representative, who was recommended to and appointed by the Board of Agriculture. They were responsible for seeing that the instructions of the WWAC were carried out in their districts and for appointing village registrars. The Bedfordshire WWAC understood from the outset that the task of registration was not straightforward, and those women who were available for work had previously shown reluctance to sign up to both the National Register and the local Labour Exchanges. To encourage participation, the names of the registrars were prominently displayed in village post offices or other public venues and were published in the local press. Women were asked to indicate on the card the amount of hours per day and days per week they were available to work and whether they could work in their own neighbourhood only, or 'wherever needed'. After consultation with the War Agricultural Committee, the WWAC withdrew from their original intention to advertise a wage of 4d per hour for women after it became apparent that local farmers had expressed disquiet at a set rate. Instead the Committees informed registrars that it believed the sum

⁶¹ IWM, EMP, 25/10, Report July 1918, 9

of 2s 6d for an eight-hour day was 'a fair wage for women workers on the land'.⁶² The rate suggested by the Bedfordshire WWAC, 4d per hour, followed local practice but this early confrontation indicates that farmers did not appreciate what they construed as interference from women outside their own class and community.

The WWAC appreciated that it was a long-established custom to engage women in the market-gardening districts of Bedfordshire and registrars were instructed not to 'enrol women who are already employed as regular workers and on whom farmers rely for labour at certain times of the year, unless they are prepared to offer their services at other times when they know their regular employer will not want them'.⁶³ The objective of the WWAC was therefore to extend the employment of women into other districts of the county and 'to increase the supply of workers by enrolling all women available for work on the land, whether whole or part time, in their own neighbourhood'.⁶⁴ At the end of each month, village registrars collated the numbers of women enrolled and the numbers of orders for labour from farmers, and sent a report to the district representatives. In May 1916 the WWAC minute book recorded 260 women registered and 282 unregistered women working on the land. A summer recruitment drive, which included demonstrations and competitions in women's work at a farm in Biddenham, saw the number of women registered rise to 680 by July, of whom 580 were at work in August. As in other counties the Bedford WWAC was conscious that this did not represent the true number of women working and it expressed its frustration that 'many will not register'.⁶⁵

Beyond the registration and placement of women, the WWAC also undertook to organize and promote training for women in co-operation with the Bedfordshire Education Committee Scheme and a number of local farmers who offered their services. The instruction was 'to fit women to perform the lighter operations in agricultural work' and the district representatives had to

⁶² BLARS, WWI, WAI/1, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee minutes, 1916-19

⁶³ BLARS, WWI WAI/1

⁶⁴ BLARS, WWI, WA2/1, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Report, December 1916

⁶⁵ HMSO, Summary of the Work of the WWACs, 6

comment on the 'suitability or otherwise' of any potential candidates. The training lasted for eight weeks, with an initial maintenance grant of 10s per week rising to 15s after the first four weeks. Daily attendance was required.⁶⁶ Thus the pool from which women could be recruited for training was restricted; only young women, of the 'right' type and who could work full-time were targeted. Its attractiveness to village women, many of whom had domestic and childcare responsibilities, was therefore limited: by May 1916 of the 66 women who had put their names forward for training, 26 were from outside the county and 17 were from Luton. Only nine women had been trained and placed in work on farms at that date. By the end of the year however the Committee reported some success, with women being trained and engaged in 'whole-time skilled work' such as milking, looking after livestock, horse hoeing, harrowing, and driving hay-tedders and binders.⁶⁷

At the end of its first year of operation the Bedfordshire WWAC was able to make a comprehensive report on the employment of women and girls in the county. It found over 2000 women worked on the land (registered and non-registered), with just under 500 of these working on a regular basis (Table 3). Women had been employed in 'such general work as hoeing, weeding, setting mangolds, manure spreading, root pulling and carting, mangold pitting, shocking corn, stacking, threshing, hedging and ditching, and in setting, picking up and sifting potatoes'.⁶⁸ This was in addition to the much smaller group of women outlined above, who had been trained in specialist skills. Reports on each of the districts help us to understand how supply and demand issues shaped women's work at the very local level. In some villages it was alternative work, that was the main issue, and the low levels of women working on the land in 1916 were related to the existence of alternative work opportunities. In the Ampthill district the nature of alternative work was varied, some paid and some not. In the villages of Maulden and Clophill women worked on allotments and

⁶⁶ BLARS, WWI, WA1/1

⁶⁷ BLARS, WWI, WA2/1

⁶⁸ BLARS, WWI, WA2/1

small family holdings and therefore did not register for work on the land. Down the road at Haynes and Lidlington, although there was 'great demand' for women for hoeing and weeding, 'owing to the

Table 3: Women workers on the land in Bedfordshire, December 1916

District	Regular	Casual	Registered	Not registered
Amphill	27	40	67	95
Bedford East	44	45	127	115
Bedford West	20	8	49	40
Biggleswade	59	147	84	397
Sandy	97	98	5	250
Dunstable	11	19	1	29
Eaton Socon	54	22	111	28
Harrold	6	5	11	15
Leighton Buzzard	3	2	5	10
Luton	10	6	12	27
Potton	17	10	57	50
Sharnbrook	22	35	23	67
Shefford	97	69	286	100
Woburn	9	0	9	8
TOTAL	476	506	847	1231

Source: Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Record Service [hereafter BLARS], WWI WA2/1, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee report, December 1916

proximity' of the army camp 'most of the women have been employed in laundry work'. In Maulden, Flitwick and Felton, the straw hat industry secured the 'time of many of the women'. In the Leighton Buzzard, Dunstable and Luton districts, meanwhile, the very low level of female employment on the land was accounted for by the availability of factory and munitions work. Demand for women's labour also varied between and within districts according to the nature of farm production. In Biggleswade and Sandy, the employment of women in market gardens was 'very general' and probably underestimated, with large gangs of seasonal workers excluded from the figures, whereas in Woburn there was very little employment and it 'had not been usual to employ women'. Although women were considered essential to the market-gardening districts, there was still hesitation over their suitability to perform other types of farm work. In the villages of Wilden and Ravensden (Bedford East) women were able to 'help with poultry and other light work' on the arable farms of the district but beyond that it was felt the land was 'too heavy for the average woman's capabilities'. In Bedford West women were said to be employed 'where there is suitable work', and in the Eaton Socon district women's work was 'mostly casual in the winter as brussel picking etc., not suitable work for women'. There were some exceptions to this pattern. In the Shefford district for example women were reported as having excelled in threshing 'and except for carrying away the sacks have done as well as men'.⁶⁹

The numbers of village women working on the land in the county remained steady in 1917. By early summer of that year it was estimated that 530 women were working regularly, and another 500 seasonally, with over 1000 in the summer.⁷⁰ They were joined at various times by gangs culled from other local sources, such as boys from the Turvey Reformatory School and high school girls who

⁶⁹ All quotes in this paragraph from BLARS, WWI, WA2/1

⁷⁰ BLARS, IWW, WA2/2, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee Report, 1 June 1917

went hoeing for various farmers during the 1917 Easter holidays.⁷¹ However it is clear from the minute books that the attentions of the Bedfordshire WWAC had turned to organising the training and recruitment of women for the Land Army under the National Service Scheme. New recruitment, training and finance sub-committees were formed, and an office, set up in St Paul's Square, Bedford ran a Stores Department, to supervise the fitting and allocation of clothing, and a lending library. A new Organising Secretary and Welfare Officer were appointed. Group Leaders, to take charge of gangs of workers, were also selected. Farmhouses were transformed into hostels for WLA recruits at Cotton End near Bedford, Wren Park in Shefford and Luton Hoo, and in conjunction with the Girls Friendly Society and Young Women's Christian Association, accommodation was provided in Bedford for women between farm placements.

By late spring 1918 there were 93 Land Army women employed in Bedfordshire, with a further 16 being trained on 'practice farms', the demand being for permanent milkers and horsewomen.⁷² By the summer their numbers had reached 225 (including 18 still in training), employed by 80 farmers.⁷³ Overall, during the three years of WLA operations (it was demobilized at the end of 1919), 550 women passed through the Bedford office.⁷⁴ Although the Bedfordshire WWAC did much to promote the position of village women it was conscious that endeavours with the WLA absorbed a great deal of its time. It strived to do 'Everything possible to encourage the employment of local women' but the work itself, and the women who performed it, often remained inconspicuous and unsung.⁷⁵ After detailing work of the three WLA recruits who had been trained for motor tractor work, Mrs Whitchurch noted in the July 1918 report, 'I am sure there is a great deal of interesting and unusual work being done by local women of which we do not always hear'.⁷⁶

⁷¹ BLARS, IWW, WA2/2

⁷² BLARS, IWW, WA2/4, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee Report, 1 May 1918

⁷³ BLARS, IWW, WA2/5, Bedfordshire Women's War Agricultural Committee report, 20 July 1918

⁷⁴ BLARS, 1WW, WA1/2

⁷⁵ 'The Village Woman', *The Times*, 2 October 1917; BLARS, IWW, WA2/4

⁷⁶ BLARS, WWI, WA2/5

The evidence from Bedfordshire suggests that issues of demand and supply dominated the pattern of women's labour on the land during the First World War. The extent and nature of women's work fluctuated according to farm size and type, local traditions of employment in agriculture and the location of industries that competed for female workers. Thus the government investigator for the county in 1918 found that whilst women were employed 'to a considerable extent' in the market gardening districts, their services were not deployed as extensively 'as one might have expected' in other areas.⁷⁷ In regions where there was demand for female workers, farmers favoured the labour of village women because it was convenient, flexible and cheap. There were some difficulties in that the availability of local women was circumscribed by their household and childcare duties, and they were tied to working in their own districts. But the labour of village women could be fitted around the seasonal rhythms of farm production, and for farmers who required workers at peak times of the year, the employment of local women made practical and economic sense. In Bedfordshire, as in other counties, they far outnumbered WLA workers but their contribution has been eclipsed.

V

The considerable contribution that local village women made on the home front in England and Wales is in danger of being forgotten in the prevailing dominant narratives of women's participation in agricultural production in the First World War. The reasons for the very public and visible presence of the WLA in both popular memory and academic history are numerous. The first links to the nature of the surviving source material. Although White has persuasively shown that the WLA was distinguished by a fractured and complex organisational structure, it left a wealth of official papers, personal testimonies and visual ephemera in its wake. Land Army women were very much part of the war propaganda machine and were extensively portrayed in print, posters and

⁷⁷ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports by investigators, 2

photographs. Their leaders and organising bodies left a considerable, if incomplete, written footprint. A number of women who served in the Land Army wrote autobiographical accounts, and the WLA forms the focus of the Imperial War Museum's archival, sound and art collections in relation to land work.⁷⁸ Village women, meanwhile, stand in the shadows, recorded and judged by others. It is almost impossible to reconstruct how village women perceived their work or understood their place in the wartime economy, as they remain largely nameless and voiceless in the narratives of the Great War.

The marginalization of rural women goes further than this however. The appeal of the WLA, to both contemporaries and modern day historians, is linked to its modernity and novelty. It was, as White argues, the first time women came together to form a national organization for female farm work.⁷⁹ WLA recruits were full-time workers, working the same hours as men, and paid a national weekly wage.⁸⁰ They received some training (although this could be of a somewhat rudimentary nature), with the intention 'that they should do mainly skilled work, such as horse-work, driving motor ploughs, milking, stock-work, and dairy-work, leaving most of the hoeing, spreading, and fruit-picking to the native women'.⁸¹ They were provided with a free uniform, which included two pairs of breeches, a pair of boots, overalls, hat, mackintosh and cardigan waistcoat. This uniform was symbolic of their place in the wartime effort, and like those worn by munitions workers, formed a crucial element of their modernity (and of their appeal to outside observers). As Angela Woollacott has argued, the adoption of uniforms 'was seen as part of women's claims to participation in the heart of the nation's business'.⁸² Village women meanwhile were paid an hourly rate for their work

⁷⁸ Bonnie White, 'Remembrance, Retrospection, and the Women's Land Army in First World War Britain', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 22 (2011), 162-94

⁷⁹ White, *The Women's Land Army*, 8

⁸⁰ They were paid 20s a week, rising to 22s in March 1918 and 25s in April 1919). WLA recruits signed up for a period of six or twelve months and in theory could not leave without permission. See Clarke, *Women's Land Army*, 21

⁸¹ 1919 [Cmd. 25], Reports of Investigators, 344

⁸² Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994), 215

and were only paid for the work they performed. Even when the 1917 Corn Production Act introduced a minimum wage in agriculture, only one county, Northumberland, set a weekly wage rate for whole-time female workers. Village women did not receive a free uniform and could only obtain outdoor work clothing through their registrar at cost price: 10s 6d for a coat, 7s for boots, 5s for a skirt and 4s for gaiters. This was beyond the budget of most working-class rural women. The image conveyed of these women by the correspondent to *The Times* who began this article, is poles apart from the healthy, happy, WLA members who smiled down from government recruitment posters: 'She wears no smart uniform; she works in dreadful broken boots, an old print dress and a man's hat, and when the fields are very wet and muddy she wraps sacks, gaiter-wise, about her legs; if she wants anything better she has to pay for it out of scanty wages.'⁸³ In Bedfordshire it drove one young woman to make an application for compensation to the WWAC in September 1918 for damaged clothes 'owing to her not having a uniform'. They awarded her 13s 3d.⁸⁴

The novelty of the WLA also lay in its temporary nature. Women drew approval and admiration for their work precisely because it was understood as transitory. Looking back at the war, Lord Ernle appreciated that there had been 'scarcely any branches of agriculture to which, under the pressure of war emergencies, women did not put their hands.' The contribution of the Land Army had, he argued, been 'indispensible' and admissible even where it permeated into branches of agriculture previously preserved for men, such as ploughing, threshing and shepherding. In 'ordinary' times however, these were not jobs for women. Ploughing on heavy land was not a 'suitable occupation for women', threshing was 'a dirty and heavy job' and shepherding was not 'an industry which is satisfied by the hooped petticoat and beribboned crook of Chelsea China'.⁸⁵ The WLA therefore was understood as an extraordinary element of the workforce for the duration of the war only, just as those women who worked in munitions factories or on trams and buses were. As

⁸³ 'The Village Woman', *The Times*, 2 October 1917

⁸⁴ BLARS, WWI, WA1/1

⁸⁵ Ernle, *The Land and the People*, 187-9

Deborah Thom has argued women were 'photographed, displayed, praised and held up as heroines, not as conventional workers, but as dilutees'.⁸⁶ The emphasis was therefore on women's war work being exceptional, in response to the unique circumstances of the war. Village women, who in some areas had always worked on the land, either as full-time workers in regions of the north or as a pool of seasonal or casual labour, fit less easily into the wartime accounts of temporary mobilization. Although they were slowly brought into the official narrative of patriotic war worker, their position was always problematic. They were reluctant to sign up to village registers and only a small number who worked took up the opportunity to apply for a government-issued green armlet in recognition of their service.⁸⁷ Their wartime labour was part of a wider history that was characterized firstly by difficulties in classifying and measuring women's work in agriculture, and secondly by continuities in local labour demand and supply caused by the nature of agricultural production. Women's experiences were varied and diverse, depending on where they lived, their age and family circumstances. But for most village women, the effect of working on the land during the war was not socially or economically transformative. The conditions of their labour largely followed pre-war practices and after the war they remained a pool of cheap, casual labour. This should not detract from the vital contribution that rural working-class women made to wartime farming however. Thousands of village women participated as part-time, casual or regular paid workers on farms; they were central, not peripheral, to women's contribution to wartime food production and deserve to be brought in from the cold.

Word count (including footnotes): 10, 420

⁸⁶ Deborah Thom, *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War One* (London, 1988), 72

⁸⁷ Each woman who registered was issued with a certificate and after 30 days service could apply for an armlet. In July 1916 the Bedfordshire WWAC noted that 685 women were registered and 87 applicants for armlets had been received