

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - May 2012

Ann Armstrong - Life in the Land Army



Wargrave Local History Society's May meeting was a highly entertaining and interesting talk on Life in the Land Army by Ann Armstrong, in which she recalled her personal experiences of war-time on a farm. Some 8000 girls had served in the Land Army, but recognition of the part they played in the war effort only came relatively recently, with a certificate and hat badge presented to survivors - the relatives of others have nothing to record their service. The surviving members of the Land Army were now 'Senior Citizens'. Ann gave a definition of 'Senior Citizens' - people who were 'here before the pill or tv, or man walked on the moon - to whom 'hardware' was nuts and bolts, 'software' had not been invented', and a 'joint' meant Sunday roast !! Their poor hearing could lead to mis-understandings - she delighted the audience with her humorous examples.

Ann had been born in Cornwall, but her family had moved to the Harlesden area of north-west London. This was an industrial part of the city, and at the time afflicted by days of yellow fog. Before the war, she had worked for the Post Office. When the war came, the family had an Anderson shelter, where they would go every night when the siren went. However, as the neighbours also came into the shelter, there was little chance to sleep. For a while, Ann went to keep an elderly lady company overnight - but the lady's "habits" meant that Ann did not stay for long!

She did not like life in London, so Ann decided to join the Land Army, and was sent to a college in Sussex to train in dairying. Here she learnt how to milk cows - with the aid of a canvas bag fitted with rubber teats and a lubricant would be put on the hands to aid the process. When the girls were thought to be proficient, they would be sent to a farm - in most cases in a group, but Ann was sent on her own to Wiltshire. Taking her bike with her, she was met at Chippenham by a rather grumpy farmer and his wife. Her wages would be 30/- per week - although this sounds very low, she was only getting £2 per week at the Post Office. (and her 'board and lodging' cost just £1 per week). The farmer said she would get ½ day off per week - not much use to her with home in London, so she suggested she should work a whole month and then have 2 days off.

Work began each day at 5am, when there were 56 cows to be milked - and ended at about 6pm (she later learnt that they were only 'supposed' to work for 8 hours a day). Her lodgings were to be at a cottage down the road from the farm. The 'facilities' here were basic - apart from the bed, her room had one chair, and a series of nails on the wall to hang clothes on. The toilet was a shed at the bottom of the garden, with a bench with a hole in it, and there was no window and no latch to the door - so the door would be left open, and the occupant would sing. There was little heat - as a way to keep warm, she could suck peppermints!

On a modern farm, the cows are backed to a gully for milking, but here all was at the same level, so the cow muck just fell to the milking shed floor. If the cow lifted its tail, Ann would move quickly - but she might still get splashed. The cows were dirty - and if the tail hit her, it was like being struck by a wooden club. Wearing the Land Army uniform was impractical - dungarees and wellingtons being more suitable. Milking took place in open sheds - she was given a stool, but no smock, no cloth to wipe the cow, and no lubricant to use as she had been trained to do. On asking where such was, she was told to 'do as the men

do, and spit on the hand'. At first the cows would not let her near them, as she smelt different, so one of the men gave her his hat - which 'smelt as though he had worn it for 70 years'. The cows did then accept her. The men did not clean the cow's udders, nor bother to test the teats for mastitis - but the rest of the farm was primitive - gauzes used to strain the milk being stiff, having scabs on, and the 'less hairy' side being used. When the bucket of milk from the cows was put into a larger container before taking to the cooling shed, the feral cats would come to lick at it, whilst there was 'not a broom in the place' - and the place was generally 'dirty'. After breakfast, the chickens would be let out and the eggs collected - again everything was dirty. If the lad cleaned the milk buckets, it was done outside first, then the same brush would be used inside - and the buckets stood on the uncleaned floor. Ann commented that 'germs are good for you' ! Cleanliness seemed not to matter - but everybody was too busy to clean anything.

One of the effects of all this was that her clothes would take on the animal smells. She asked her landlady if there was any perfume - and was offered a home made concoction that 'looked like urine, with mould on it' -- 'at least it would smell different to cow muck'. She might occasionally go to a local dance, but had to be back by 9pm, as the landlady's husband went to bed then, and she could only reach her bedroom through theirs! One of the farm workers tried to get 'over friendly' with her - and put his arm round her - but she declined his advances - as 'have you ever smelt sheep dip' ? Eventually, she got a 'pins and needles' numbness and ache in her hands, making it difficult to hold anything, to write a letter, ride her bike, etc. Managing to get to see a doctor, she was told to go home the next day, and to hospital, as she had milkers neuritis - serious if it got any further. The doctor would tell the farmer - Ann being fearful of how he would react. He was sad to see her leave - and said 'he never knew anyone could work so hard' . Back in London, she then had 3 months of daily treatment at Park Royal hospital - but her 2 years in the land Army had come to an end.

Ann shared with us other aspects of life at that time - from large land mines landing in London to home made entertainment in Wiltshire.

The next meeting takes place on Tuesday, June 12th, when Ann Griffin will tell us about the Cookham Paddock Excavation - an archaeological dig in 2005 beside Cookham's Trinity Church. In July, Society members will be visiting Fawley Hill Museum (for which all the available places are now taken). The following meeting takes place on Tuesday, September 11th, when Geoff and Val Beckett will tell us about Berkshire's Lady Fliers, with stories and pictures relating to the lady aviators of the county.