

BOLTON REMEMBERS THE WAR

Transcript of interview with Betty Hall née Settle (BH) • Women's Land Army

Interviewed by Ken Beevers (K) 28.07.2005

BH: Betty Jean Hall.

K: And when were you born, Betty?

BH: 1918.

K: And whereabouts were you born?

BH: In Bolton. Lonsdale Road.

K: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

BH: Yes, I had two brothers. One was in the RAF, killed in 1940 and I had another brother who was in the Merchant Navy in the Atlantic, the Atlantic Convoys going to Russia and New York and he died at the end of the War, I think it was largely due to his experiences.

K: I'm sorry to hear that.

BH: So, I'm the only surviving member.

K: What did your parents do?

BH: My Father was in the First World War and he was commissioned, and he survived the War, and came home with his nerves wrecked. There was a job waiting for him as a draughtsman, but he wasn't fit enough to do it, so he lost it. And then he just had to take what jobs he could. It was a very trying time for him, but eventually he got a job as a salesman for... a brewer's sundriesman, they were called, they sold everything for brewing and public houses and things like that.

K: That sounds interesting! (laughs)

BH: (laughs) Fortunately, he was teetotal.

K: Could have been an occupational hazard, visiting pubs and breweries...

BH: Strict Methodist!

K: Which brewery was it?

BH: He went round Lancashire and Yorkshire, visiting breweries.

K: Different ones?

BH: Yes, no particular one.

K: Yes, it was the sundries he... yes.

BH: Yes.

K: People are interested in this sort of thing! (laughs)

BH: Well I find my Father's bag of samples very interesting, because, he had things like cherries, for cocktails, and something called Bees Wings, which they put in soft drinks, I think, to make it look as though it was natural lemon or natural orange of something.

K: Did your Mother work?

BH: Well, before she married, she and her sister, had a shop on Blackburn Road, Bolton. My Mother was a milliner and her sister was a dressmaker.

K: Where did you go to school Betty?

BH: Folds Road Central School.

K: When you left school, what did you do?

BH: I went to work for a small department store on Bradshawgate, called Richard Moyles, and I was in the cash desk and earned the princely sum of six and six a week, which I thought, looking back, was outrageous when I was handling all that money, for the store.

K: Whereabouts on Bradshawgate?

BH: The corner of Great Moor Street. I remember upstairs in the Gown Department, it was a very long room, beautifully carpeted, and the sales girls all wore long black dresses that trailed on the floor as they moved. And it was all rather elegant.

K: Sounds it. So you only got a good class of Bolton customers...

BH: People had accounts, yes.

K: And were you doing that job right up until 1939 or ..?

BH: No, I had another job in Manchester working for Etam's, who sold luxury underwear for ladies.

K: And were you working there when War was declared... or?

BH: I think I was, I ought to tell you, I don't know whether this is relevant, but I met my husband when I was eighteen and he'd got a job in West Africa. He was just going out to take up this job in the African bush in Nigeria. And I just met him before he went out and I fell romantically in love with him, because I thought, what a handsome man, what a romantic job and off he went. He came back after eighteen months in 1940 and War had broke out and he came home with the idea of joining the RAF and training as a pilot. It was the Battle of Britain time and all these pilots were being killed in their hundreds. And when he told his parents what he intended to do, his mother pleaded with him not to join. So, after three months leave, when we got engaged to be married, he went back to his job in Nigeria and joined the Royal West African Frontier Force. I'm telling you this because, my future, when I started my married life was to be in Nigeria, and that influenced me. So, when he'd gone, I then decided to join the Women's Land Army.

K: When War was declared, do you remember that particular day, at all in any way?

BH: I can remember sitting with my family, listening to Chamberlain telling us that we were at War, on the radio.

K: And did your Father say anything in particular?

BH: I think we thought it was rather... the young ones thought it was exciting you know, we thought it was going to be something different and I think my Father had an entirely different view because he'd suffered life in the trenches during the first War and all the horrors of that.

K: Yes, he would wouldn't he? He'd see it differently. So you decided to join the Women's Land Army and you said you had a choice?

BH: Yes, I was given a choice, of dairy farming, general farming, timber and horticulture, and I wanted to do horticulture.

K: So did you volunteer to do it?

BH: Yes, and at the time, I've just remembered I was working at the Royal Ordnance Factory at Radcliffe, in the office. I volunteered from there. That was essential War work. But I wanted to do something a bit more exciting and worthwhile.

K: So, what date was this?

BH: '41 I think, yes '41.

K: After you got engaged. Where did you actually volunteer, did you have to go somewhere? How did you .. just fill in a form or..?

BH: I can't remember that very much, I must have filled in a form and I was given an interview somewhere, but my memory's a bit vague about that, but... I think I should tell you that we were sent down to Wiltshire and there were fifty girls from Lancashire sent down to this place. And in those days there was a great deal of secret work going on in the place underground in this place - Corsham in Wiltshire. It was all very hush-hush. I know the Navy and the Army were involved and Royal Ordnance but we knew very little about it. And the idea was to camouflage all the surface covering this area, which was a very rough area with rocks, boulders, stones, and there were a few Irish labourers working on it, so they must have decided fifty Lancashire girls could probably cope with this. And we had to fill a wheelbarrow with stones and boulders, wheel them off, if we were capable, dump them somewhere, clear a space, spread soil, scatter lawn seed and then move on to the next plot. And it was just like hard labour, because most of us had worked in shops and offices and we'd never done anything like this, and everybody was crying, moaning... Some wanted to go home. And I was disappointed because it wasn't my idea of horticulture. I think I stuck it for a month, and we had a Land Army visitor who came round looking after our welfare and I complained to this lady the Honourable Mrs Methuen and told her I'd volunteered to do horticulture and I wanted something better than this. So I was then sent to another job and the RAF had commandeered Rudloe Manor, nearby, which had acres of grounds to this place and it was the headquarters of Number 12 Fighter Group in the RAF. And it was mainly officers, and they kept on the head gardener and employed four Land Girls to dig over the land and grow fruit and vegetables for the camp, and I loved it. I learned a great deal, even though that was hard work and I was billeted with the Honourable Mrs Methuen in the village of Corsham and I think there were a couple of Squadron Leaders from the RAF, a couple of Army officers, some WAAFS and three Land Girls and we were put up in the attics as befits our station in life! (laughs) There was class distinction even there you see. But we didn't mind, because we were on our own up in the attic and they had a very friendly cook there who used to

open the window downstairs to let us in and out at night, if we were going out somewhere. But in the end, I think Mrs Methuen got a bit tired of us and we got a flat on this RAF camp and after cycling three or four miles to work from Corsham village, it was a relief to be on the camp. And we worked very hard. I think the winters were the hardest time, when you were working in the dark, picking frozen Brussels sprouts, listening to the owls hooting. And we used to feel rather envious when the WAAFS used to march by. They were going on duty, to one of these rooms, you've probably seen them on the films where they plotted the movements of enemy aircraft on a big map - so they were doing that below ground. And they would march past in a company or whatever it was, all very smart, beautifully made-up and there used to be perfume drifting on the air behind them, because you could get make-up and perfume in the NAAFI. So that was one advantage for us, that we could buy things in the NAAFI, where they sold cigarettes, chocolate, make-up, things like that. And one of the things that amused us was, we wore dungarees, couple of jumpers, our hair tied up in a turban, looking very scruffy, working very hard, and... At night we would go out, perhaps to some local dance, and we had to go through the guard room, where you had to sign in and out, and they couldn't believe the transformation, because we'd all glamorised ourselves, and...

Now, as I've told you my intention was to go abroad to join my husband, and I'd no idea how difficult it would be to get a passage or a flight, so I decided to leave the Land Army and go home and prepare clothes for living in the tropics. So I went home and I realized after a couple of weeks that it wasn't going to happen, so I re-joined the Land Army and this time they sent me down to the Thames Valley area, Staines and Shepperton and I worked there on a market garden, a huge market garden, where all the produce went to Covent Garden in London and I quite enjoyed that, but it was a lonely life, as I was the only girl there from Lancashire and I was working with about six girls, all southerners. But I was fortunate that I was invited to their homes at weekends occasionally, which was nice.

And then I realized that... by this time I had applied for, and got a passport, so I'd made a start. I decided to leave the Land Army and go home. I asked for a transfer nearer home. This time I went to Westhoughton, and I can remember the horror of going from all the beauties of Wiltshire and Thames Valley to Westhoughton on a winter's day... To this little farm at the bottom of a slag heap. And there was a little farmer called Eli, Eli Morris, and he employed a Land Girl who had a grumbling appendix, I think it was called, and I think in those days, the bed situation in the hospitals was just as bad as it is now, and she was still waiting for a bed after I'd been there six months. But we used to go out on the milk float, from this farm, delivering milk, the old-fashioned float drawn by a horse, and in those days nearly every house was empty because everybody were on War work. The children were in Wartime nurseries, nobody locked their door of course, you'd go to the first house, open the door, take your can of milk and your measuring, find a jug and measure the milk into the jug and come out again, and then go in the next one. And it's unbelievable now isn't it, that you could do that? So I found that quite hard, particularly as I had to go on the train every morning, I had to get up very early, about five o'clock, to get the train to start work early.

K: From Lonsdale Road, was that?

BH: Yes, yes.

K: Do you know what the name of the farm was?

BH: No, all I can remember is the name of the man, Eli Morris. I know it was near this slag heap.

K: Just go back to Corsham, was exactly was your job there? Was that vegetables as well?

BH: Vegetables and fruit, yes.

K: They were using the grounds for that?

BH: Yes, and we had some kind of machine to turn over the soil, I've forgotten the name, like an excavator or something. And we produced a lot of food for the camp, actually, it was a good job, because we got very hungry doing all this work, and we would sit in the canteen, or whatever it was called with the airmen and the WAAFS and they would be amazed at the amount of food we put away, I think (laughs) Because we were so hungry. And I've often thought back since, I wonder if my good health now, if my Wartime work was responsible, because we were in the fresh air, getting lots of exercise, lots of fruit and vegetables.

Going back to when we worked at Rudloe Manor, they kept this head gardener on. When you're doing that type of work, you've time to talk and discuss things and we discussed everything under the sun. And he had very left-wing views, and I used to go home on leave to my parents telling them all these things about what we'd discussed (laughs) with this man. And my Father was horrified - he was a true blue Tory, I think he thought his daughter was changing, and

whoever this man was, he wasn't a very good influence, but I learned a lot. I learned all kinds of things that I don't think I would have learned but for the fact that I'd left home, gone to a different environment and met different kinds of people. I mean, the Honourable Mrs Methuen was the sister-in-law of the local squire, Lord Methuen who lived at The Court and I met people of different 'class' it was called then. And of the four Land Girls, there was one from Bristol - she eventually married a GI and went to California, there was a local girl, who was below average intelligence I would say, Gwen, otherwise a very nice girl and a Jewess called Rachel Marks from London, so we were a very mixed group. I think it was part of our education really (laughs), working hard and discussing things and knowing we were doing a good job

K: Have you ever kept in touch..?

BH: Yes, I have, I still get a card from Doreen, who went to California, and she's still alive and she's about my age. We just send cards now. I've lost touch with the others, but I did go back with my husband, about... I think it must have been in the 1950's, 1960's. I kept in touch with the head gardener for quite a while. He was a man with very religious views and his daughter has gone out to Germany after the War in some religious capacity, I'm not sure what. And he had a cottage near Rudloe Manor, but unfortunately, he was no longer there when we went back. But I had written to him to tell him what had happened to me, because I'd had rather an eventful life in Africa. And it was still an RAF camp, because I remember talking to the aircraftman who was on duty in the entrance. I told him I'd worked there as a Land Girl and I don't think he could believe it. (laughs) because he looked at me, and I was looking completely different of course, by this time, and... But it was nice to go back.

K: But you've not been back since that time, no?

BH: No, no. It was interesting to me that this Corsham was a typical village. They had the Methuen Arms, because it was the Lord Methuen territory, and they had a skittle alley, and lots of little shops and lots of old cottages that had been lived in by the Flemish weavers that came over. It had quite a history. It was a lovely little village. I can remember this Lord Methuen's place called The Court, and he had two or three peacocks and the sound of the peacocks every morning... (laughs)

K: Were there ever any air raids at the base, or..?

BH: I don't remember them, not in Wiltshire. But when I went to work in Middlesex, there was quite a number there, and I remember all the activity before the invasion, lots of armoured cars, and tanks on the move and we knew something was up then.

K: You obviously had plenty of food didn't you? Because that was one of my questions, and being on an RAF base, there was no shortage.

BH: No, there was no shortages, so I didn't suffer at all in that way.

K: Did people treat you all right? ...because you weren't in the RAF, you were just a Land Girl.

BH: I don't know. I don't think they knew how to treat us... We were a different species! But I remember I got married in '44 and my photograph was in the Bolton Journal and someone on the camp must have had this journal sent to them and word got round that one of the Land Girls had got married and they were showing this photograph and couldn't believe it was me, in all my bride's glory!

K: So you got married but you were still has to go back, you were still on leave?

BH: Yes, my husband went back to his civilian job. He was de-mobbed at the end of 1944, because he was buying palm oil and rubber from the Africans, which was essential for the recovery in Britain, I presume, and they thought his job was essential.

K: What was your wedding like?

BH: Well, I was down in Corsham, of course, and my Mother had to do all the arrangement. And I'd had some material saved for my wedding dress, but there was no time to get it made up or anything, and I was broke. One of the things that I have against the Land Army was that pay was very poor. And prior to my going in the Land Army, I worked in this Royal Ordnance Factory in the office, and I was paid quite well. In those days the Income Tax was a problem, because when I went in the Land Army I owed quite a bit of Income Tax and I had to pay it back so much a week out of my meagre pay and I'd no money to put to my wedding at all. But my husband arranged for me to have an allowance from his Army pay, so in fact, he wanted me to send a photograph out to him in Africa and I couldn't afford it. So he then realised the financial situation, and this wedding was being arranged hurriedly before he went back to Africa. So I had enough money to go into Bath, to one of the nice shops to buy a dress. Just an ordinary pale blue dress,

I remember, it was the only thing that was suitable, I remember, and I sent a telegram to my bridesmaid suggesting she got a dress in dusty pink, which was her least favourite colour! And I remember the best man couldn't get leave and a brother-in-law who was in the RAF happened to be on leave, so he stepped in - he was best man. And my Mother arranged a little reception, saved up a lot of points and things from the rations.

K: Where was that held?

BH: Something called the Empire Café on Bradshawgate. It was a kind of little café come restaurant on the first floor, over some shops, that's all I can remember about it. And I was married at Bridge Street Methodist Church, which is now a casino, in a bitterly cold day in February, when there was a blizzard blowing.

K: Did you have a honeymoon?

BH: Yes, we went to the Grange Hotel, and I remember travelling on this train, which of course, was blackout, and arriving at this hotel, which was also blackout, trying to find our way into it, because there were no lights anywhere, and eventually finding a door (laughs) to get into it! And we had a week's honeymoon there, touring the Lake District.

K: How much were you paid?

BH: It's very difficult compared with money today. I know we got our keep free and our quarters on this RAF camp, but I don't think it was more than about perhaps twenty five shillings a week.

K: And was that a standard payment, so that the farmer in Westhoughton would pay you the same?

BH: I'm not sure.

K: You didn't get your keep at Westhoughton did you? Because you lived at home.

BH: I lived at home, yes. I can't remember the details there.

K: The farmer, did he look upon you just as cheap labour? Or..?

BH: Yes, I think... I can remember going on this milk float into the centre of Westhoughton, where he arranged to meet one of his farmer friends and they used to tell jokes about us. I can see them now, three of them together standing, looking at us. I don't know what they were saying, it was perhaps as well we couldn't hear... They were talking about this other Land Girl, Lily, she was called and myself. I don't know exactly what that was about, but it was obviously causing them a lot of merriment. I've often wondered what happened to this other Land Girl. I didn't keep in touch with her because I went abroad.

K: You were obviously able to just leave the Land Army, were you?

BH: Well, you had to have some good reason, and I just had to explain what my background was, that I was waiting to go and start my married life abroad. And one good thing about the Land Army was, those of us who were married were sent on a week's course - to a house in Suffolk, I think it was - to learn about housewifery, and we even had information from a doctor about sex and birth control, which (laughs) I thought was very well ahead of it's time.

K: This was just before you got married?

BH: Yes, there were quite a lot of land girls who were going abroad like me. One of them married an Australian pilot. Another had married a Canadian pilot, and we were all going our separate ways, but we were given this week to learn how to be housewives, which I thought was a good thing really.

K: Was that cooking and..?

BH: Cooking, cleaning, shopping, and it was a good week. We all had a good time together and it was quite exciting to see a man around because, when the postman came, (laughs) he was surrounded by all these girls, all looking for letters, but it was good to see somebody of the opposite sex.

K: And was this all traditional views of housewifery?

BH: Yes, what polishes to use for what and cookery of course, and yes, all kinds of problems.

K: Was that offered to anyone else, or was it just Land Girls?

BH: This was just the Land Girls. Now this I thought was good. Someone had obviously thought this out and thought we were all finishing the War and we were going to start married life and we didn't know a thing what to expect. Yes I approved of that.

K: Yes, it does sound good, doesn't it? So although you had a uniform and everything, there wasn't any officers or anything, or was there?

BH: Yes, there was an office somewhere, with Lady somebody running it. It was nearly all county ladies, you know, that ran it. You can imagine it, can't you? And, on the whole, they were very good to us and... but in a way, out of touch with people like us who come from Lancashire, with different backgrounds.

K: Northern people, yes!

BH: Yes, and we all had strong Lancashire accents! (laughs)

K: Yours would be quite Bolton would it?

BH: Yes, I can remember going down on the train, after being home on leave, and it was full of people from different services, and they were pulling my leg, and they kept saying things like 'Ee by gum' and I felt ashamed. For once in my life I felt ashamed of my accent, but, you learn. But I do remember when we were staying at Mrs Methuen's house, she gave a garden party, I don't know it was some charity of hers, and her son and daughter were home from boarding school. And somewhere I had a photograph taken and a friend of mine came down from Lancashire to spend a week with me and that was something quite different. We mixed with people that we wouldn't normally have mixed with. So in one way, it was jolly hard work, you felt you were doing something worthwhile and it was quite educational I suppose in many ways.

K: Did you have much entertainment on the camp?

BH: Well there wasn't much on the camp, but there were quite a lot dances held in the village, or I used to go into Bath at the weekend. And when I went down to Wiltshire first of all, it was end of February, beginning of March, I'd never been out of Lancashire and we were on this train going south, and we could see the difference in the hedges, the green, and the nearer we got to Somerset, where Bath is, isn't it? They were getting greener all the time, which surprised me. And then we came into Bath and I'll never forget my first sight of the Crescent in Bath, and it became one of my favourite places, and there were lots of dances held at the Pump Rooms and people of all nationalities, all the services. So, we'd go in on the local bus and get the last bus back. That was good fun. You needed all these things, we were all young and we worked hard and we all had worries about our families and husbands or boyfriends.

K: Obviously your brother was killed. Were you away or were you at home then?

BH: No, it was 1940 and I was at home, and I often thought, the fact that my husband had come home on leave, and he was a distraction, I can't think of a better word at the time, which helped my parents, I think, because they were taking in another son.

K: What was your brother's name?

BH: Gordon.

K: What was your maiden name?

BH: Settle.

K: Were there any air raids in Bolton that you remember?

BH: Yes, I think there was one near Deane Road. I'm not sure. Because we had one of those air raids in the living room, which we used as a table, (laughs) an air raid shelter I mean!

K: A shield, kind of thing?

BH: Yes, so we used to dive under there if there was an air raid.

K: Where was your brother, when he was killed?

BH: I think it was one of those on the east side of the country, there were quite a few airfields along the east coast, weren't there? And I can't remember which one it was now. Because it was rather... It was a very eventful time, my brother was killed, by fiancé had come home from abroad. We were getting engaged. There was so much happening. I think it was somewhere in Lincolnshire.

K: Lincolnshire. What were Christmases and birthdays like in the Land Army?

BH: Well, we used to come home for Christmas, I remember that, and of course, you know such a shortage of things. But my Mother was marvellous at 'make-do-and-mend'.

K: Was she?

BH: She made me a coat out of a blue blanket. I remember that. A lovely warm coat. Yes, and she did a lot of knitting, and she used to undo jumpers she'd knitted, rewind the wool, and start again, she'd do that. And she was very good at cooking, I can remember, there was, Lord Woolton's Pie, (laughs) do you remember that? And it was full of mainly grated potato, I think and onion and very little meat, but... we appreciated it. But one of the exciting things when my

brother came home - he'd been in the Merchant Navy and he'd been to New York - he'd come home with nylon stockings, make-up, lots of things like that, it was quite exciting but, I mean, we were so glad he'd arrived safely. That was the important thing, but then he'd unpack all these things he brought, it was really exciting.

K: What ships was he on? Do you remember any of their names?

BH: No, I don't know. I think it was a very hard life, because he was in the engine room all the time. An engineer officer. And I think they had a terrible time when they went to Russia

K: Mountainous seas and cold, probably unbelievable conditions, I should think.

BH: And they must have been terrified all the time. (laughs) Submarines and one thing and another. I always feel sad when I think about him and his service because so many thousands of them drowned, killed or whatever, and I don't think it was given the full publicity that it deserved. But there was so much shipping lost, wasn't there, during the War?

K: What was your brother's first name?

BH: Norman.

K: Norman.

BH: And he died eventually from a form of cancer. And I don't know whether it was a form of stomach cancer or not, because, he said, he suffered a great deal all the time he was on these ships, I don't know whether it was because they were confined to these hot engine rooms

K: Oily and...

BH: So he was never well again after that.

K: Do you remember VE Day?

BH: Yes, I was in Shepperton and I remember going up to London for VE Day, something I'll never forget.

K: Right, So, you were at Shepperton at the Land Army still, VE day, and you went up to London.

BH: With friends, a group of friends

K: A group of friends, yes. You caught the train?

BH: Yes, wonderful.

K: Celebrating in Trafalgar Square and so on...

BH: Yes, anywhere you could get in the crowd! You just went with the crowd, it was, you know, crowded everywhere, and such a feeling of relief.

K: You could get on with your life again.

BH: Yes.

K: And what happened then, did you finish at the Land Army straightaway, or..?

BH: Well then I was sent home to Westhoughton.

K: Oh sorry, so that was when you...

BH: That was when I finished in the Land Army, yes, because I was leaving to go abroad to join my husband, you see, so, it was a perfectly good reason.

K: So, how long did you work in Westhoughton, do you think?

BH: About eight months, I think.

K: Oh, so well into... nearly into 1946?

BH: Yes it was '46 when I went out to Nigeria.

K: So, VJ Day, did you do something similar?

BH: I don't remember much about that.

K: No, VE Day would be the one.

BH: Yes, that was the one, yes. I was listening to the programme on the television, that weekend, when they were celebrating VE and VJ Day and I was ashamed to think that I'd forgotten all about the bombs they dropped on those Japanese cities. It was such a dreadful thing, I think, wasn't it really?

K: It was, dreadful.

BH: And I thought 'How could I have forgotten that?'

K: You didn't work in horticulture again, did you?

BH: No, I was in Africa after that.

K: But you obviously enjoyed gardening from then...

BH: Yes, yes.

K: And working outside...

BH: And I passed my love of gardening onto my daughter.

K: Oh good.

BH: She loves it, and she's a member of the Royal Horticulture Society, whatever they call themselves. She's very interested, so I'm pleased about that. And I do a little bit of pottering here now, at the front, keeping it looking attractive.

K: Were you away from Bolton quite a while, after that?

BH: You mean when I went abroad?

K: Yes.

BH: No, about a year. It's a very long, involved story, I won't go into it.

K: We won't go into it, I just wondered...

BH: I'll just say that my husband was training Africans in jungle training, prior to going out to Burma. That must have been jolly hard work in that heat. I always remember him saying something about these Africans, they'd never worn boots, and they found that quite a novelty. No I can't think of anything else about the Land Army.

K: No, or anything to do with Wartime?

BH: I can remember going into Kingston-on-Thames to queue up for some shoes. There was one particular kind of shoes, I think they were called Joyce shoes, or something, and whether they came from abroad or not, but whenever some had arrived at a store somewhere, word got round, and all the women rushed out, and queued up and hoped they'd get a pair of these shoes

K: Joyce?

BH: Joyce shoes, yes.

K: Well, that's interesting, because other people will perhaps relate to that. Could you get those shoes in Bolton or would they be..?

BH: I don't know, I'm not sure.

K: Well, thank you very much indeed.

ENDS