

The Land Army

By January 1915 over 100,000 British men who worked on the land had gone to war. As a result, farmers were finding it difficult to carry out their seasonal work and not enough food was being produced to feed the nation. This work became even harder as the threat to supplies caused by German submarines was ever increasing.

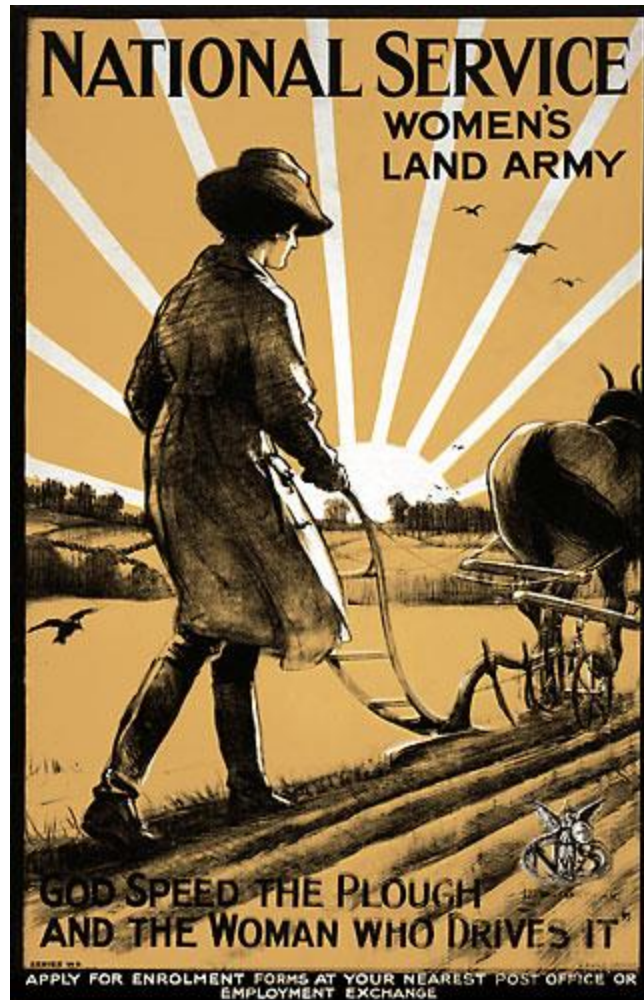
In order to help alleviate the pressure on farmers, some women undertook work on the land as part of voluntary societies. One example was the Women's National Land Service Corps, which was formed in February 1916. However, there were still not enough women to cover the work of the former agricultural labour force.

War Agricultural Committees were formed in each county, with the aim to increase the amount of food being produced in their area, but these committees were unwilling to support the use of women. They thought that women would not be able to do the physically demanding work, that men were previously hired to do. The Government's Board of Agriculture tried to change men's preconceptions regarding women working on the land. And they did this by organising practical demonstrations and competitions throughout the country, which showed that women could do a range of farm work and were more than capable of doing the physically demanding work.

A new Department for Food Production was created and finally; in January 1917, a Women's Branch was established by the Board of Agriculture under a Director, Meriel Talbot. Meriel established a civilian women's labour force of mobile workers called the Women's Land Army. The Women's Land Army would recruit members and then train them for four weeks. After the initial training of healthy young women over 18 years of age; they were channelled into farm work across the Country. Volunteers who signed up with beautiful visions of the British countryside soon become conscious of the long days and hard work demanded by life on a farm. The women fed livestock, milked cows, trapped vermin, ploughed fields, and harvested fruits and vegetables.

Recruitment efforts appealed to women's patriotism and their principles, highlighting the value of "doing one's bit." Those desiring to sign up for the Women's Land Army had to be over 20 years of age, and women were required to submit references, complete paperwork that demonstrated their education and literacy, attend an interview, and pass a physical exam. If accepted, each Land Army Girl signed a six-month or one-year contract, subsequently agreeing to be sent anywhere in the country where they were needed. Land Girls were charged 17 shillings/week for room as well as board and was typically paid between 20 – 25 shillings a week.

Between March 1917 and May 1919, 23,000 women had been placed on farms and were official full-time members of the Women's Land Army, a small but significant part of the 300,000 women who by 1918 were working on farmland. Although official records have been destroyed or were never kept, it's estimated that over a quarter of a million women volunteered for agricultural work.



Picture: Recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army. © IWM (Art.IWM PST 5996)