

Suffolk Women's Land Army – Nicky Reynolds – 14 January 2026

For our first meeting in 2026 we were joined by Nicky Reynolds who used original archive photographs and ephemera to tell us about what it took to join up, train and prepare for life in the Women's Land Army in Suffolk. Members of the Suffolk Women's Land Army were involved in agricultural work, looking after livestock and machinery to supply food to a nation that needed to fend for itself during wartime and afterwards when the nation was still in recovery up until the conclusion of the service in 1950.

During WW1 the country was in critical need of workers to work on the land to provide foodstuffs and in forestry to provide the materials for construction and for war use. Approximately 40,000 more workers were needed and in 1916 women from the Women's Farm and Garden Union were brought in to help fill this need in the Women's National Land Service Corps, in 1918 this organisation changed to the Women's Land Army until it was demobilised in 1919. Then in 1937 Gertrude Denman, well known for her work with the WI, rebuilt it setting up 53 county organisers to administer the work. Nicky told us that many of the women applying for the Land Army viewed it as an opportunity to leave home and become more independent whilst earning a wage within a structured system which gave basic training, a uniform and placement. There was a minimum age of 17 to join the Land Army and women were interviewed and underwent a medical as they would be involved in hard manual work. In return for the uniform provided the women had to give up 36 of their clothing coupons and a further 10 coupons each year. The "great coat" that was part of the uniform proved very popular and practical and was used for both work and more formal occasions. The women were paid 28 shillings a week in 1939, although this was less than men would be paid for the same work. The payment increased to 32 shillings after conscription started. The women were generally expected to work a 50 hour week and following the introduction of double summertime this often increased to 100 hours. From 1942 to 1944 production increased by 90% for wheat and 87% for potatoes and Nicky noted the link to the important role played by the Land Army. The women were supposed to have one day off a week but when looking after dairy cattle this was not always possible as milking needed to be done every day.

Group homes or hostels were set up by the Land Army to house the women who could be sent to any area of the country, with one at Lakenheath housing 116 women. The women were encouraged to volunteer in the local community and to attend church in their free time and they developed social clubs and in April 1941 the first issue of the Land Army

Magazine was produced. The local community were not always pleased to have so many, often young single, women coming into their small communities, although Nicky explained that there were 36 weddings while the Lakenheath hostel was open.

The Timber Corps was set up as a separate part of the Land Army with a slightly different uniform and higher pay which could cause some friction, until it was disbanded in 1946 when the women either resigned or transferred back to the Land Army.

Nicky explained that in 1942 the Land Army Benevolent Fund was set up to help ex members of the Land Army and provided training courses for those leaving, the Fund provided its final award in 1981.

From 1949 there was a large scale stand down of the Land Army although it continued until November 1950 when it was officially stood down. Nicky then charted the rise of the veterans movement to reunite with “soil sisters” all over the country with reunions organised in the 1980’s and 1990’s. In 2000 the organisation was invited to take part for the first time in the Remembrance Parade in London and members were officially recognised with a combined badge being presented in 2008.

Nicky told us of her role with the “Soil Sisters” organisation that was started in 2019 and from 2022 the Suffolk Women’s Land Army Memorial Trust which was fund raising for a memorial to be commissioned and sited in Suffolk to commemorate the role of those who had served, and was also aiming to provide packs of historical information about the Women’s Land Army to every primary school in Suffolk.

Lorna Fraser. 0170.