



# Marguerite Patricia Stimpson

1924-2023 (nee Yates)

and her service in the  
Women's Land Army  
during the 1940's



On 3rd September 1939 when Great Britain & France declared war on Germany for invading Poland, Marguerite was working for Brooke Bond, Kings Road, Reading packing tea.

Marguerite\* (*footnote 1*) was born and brought up in Reading and was the daughter of Jack and May Yates. Jack, with his Father Tom, ran a carpentry and joinery business in West Reading. Although christened Marguerite her parents called her Molly.

Marguerite remembers these uncertain and frightening times vividly from being issued with a gas mask which she had to carry everywhere in case of a gas attack, and homes being provided with an air raid shelter that had to be assembled and dug into the ground in the garden.

At 17 she volunteered to join the Women's Land Army (WLA) in 1940, as it seemed to offer the healthy outdoor life which appealed to her, and because everyone wanted to help the war effort. The WLA enabled men folk working on the land to be called up for military service.

*Footnote 1 - Although christened Marguerite whilst in the Land Army she was known as Pat as there were too many Margarets. To add to the confusion even more her parents called her Molly, a name she was commonly known as for most of her life. However, in later years her original christian name was widely used.*



The Women's Land Army was re-formed at the outbreak of World War 2 to work on the land, freeing male workers to go to war. By 1943 there were some 80,000 young women working in every aspect of agriculture to feed the nation. With their uniform of green ties and jumpers and brown felt slouch hats, they worked from dawn to dusk each day, undertaking farming activities.



*Holme Farm Sonning*





*Holme Farm Sonning*

Straight away after joining up she was off to Blewbury, outside Didcot to learn farming work until, on completion of her training, she was posted to the Sutton's Seeds establishment, Holme Farm and Trial grounds at Sonning. Suttons had its head office in the Market Place, Reading that consisted of offices, packing and a distribution centre for produce.

At Sutton's Marguerite worked with 5 other girls, Rene, Joan, Edie, Pat and Irene, all of whom she trained with at Blewbury, along with other Land Girls already there. She can recall being shown around the establishment by one of the resident farmers who taught her first the art of looking after and working Shire Horses and general farm work.

SUTTONS



*Kathleen, Marguerite  
(background), Betty Hall  
[Washing tomato seeds]*

When based in Reading, Marguerite started each day cycling from her parents home in West Reading to Sonning and then back again in the evening, this after a hard day's work on the land, and in all weathers throughout the year.



*Suttons Tidmarsh Farm  
Marguerite, Rene with  
Farm Worker*



*Slough Trial Grounds  
Marguerite  
Olive  
Betty*



*Trial Grounds Sonning  
Rene, Edie & Marguerite.  
Reading Power Station in  
background*

The work throughout her time in WLA consisted of threshing, ploughing, milking and harvesting, in addition to working on the trial grounds and seed production.

Marguerite recalls that in the summer, on occasional Friday evenings after a hard day's work on the land, they used to cycle from Sonning to the King Charles Head, Chazey Heath, to have a meal and drinks, sometimes playing darts, and then cycling home.

*Marguerite (Molly) with her five close Land Girls, resident farmer and farmhand in what appears to be a Land Army publicity photo*



**The Land Girls stationed at Suttons in Sonning worked under the direction of the resident Farmer, Mr A. G. Curd who wrote:**

**The W.L.A**

*When "army's" ever mentioned we think at once of men who march  
around in step in threes and talk about "Germans"*

*But there's another army; they wear khaki it is true, but they're no  
more an army than the birds up in the blue.*

*They do not carry rifles they have forks and hoes instead and not a  
cap a coloured scarf adorns each hairy head*

*Because you see this force consists entirely of young girls who go  
to work and cover up their long and blowy curls.*

*These girls all shape & sizes work together with a will  
to sow the seeds and reap the corn and some the earth to till*

*They are a very happy lot and break up into gangs  
who always stick together through the laughter and the "bangs".*

*When each day's work is over there is no parade to see they just  
break up and saunter off by bike or foot to tea.*

*Some evenings [after pay-day] each gang selects to choose if this  
week it's the pictures, the theatre or the booze.*

*Each Saturday a half day off is given to the lot; they spend the  
afternoon together more often than not.*

*They have a little leave of course and then go on the spree as they  
can get a railway warrant twice a year quite free*

*It seems to me from what I hear they're always very merry they  
like the work and in the sun they get brown as a berry.*

*But I don't think that any of them will be sad to hear that this great  
war is over in fact I think they'll cheer.*

*A lot of them have husbands who are fighting overseas and all this  
merry making helps a lot their minds to ease.*

*And they will all be very glad, of that I am quite sure  
to hear of what our men have done to help to win this war.*

*So let us wish them all the best and thank them very much for all  
that they are doing to grow us food and such*

*You can be sure you girls out there that we are in debt for working  
hard so keep it up we'll beat the Germans yet!*

Background photo: (*Womens' War Work Parade 15/08/41*), Marguerite & her fellow "land girls" from Suttons join other members of the Land Army in the Reading area to take part in this morale boosting event that took place through Reading.

Parade marches past the Town Hall and down Blagrove Street. Photo is from a Reading Chronicle collection to mark the occasion of "Women's War Week" which is now held by Reading Museum.



*"Women's War Week" -  
Parade of Women War Workers -  
15 August 1941*



*Rene, Edie, Pat Ploughing with horses, trial grounds, Sonning*



Marguerite recalls the existence of a secret radio station in operation at the trial grounds in Sonning that was connected to the war effort. Although several land girls were aware of its existence little else was known about it.

Another memory she has is of German prisoners that worked on the land at Suttons who made slippers from string which was normally used to tie up potato sacks. They used to take the string back to their camp to make the footwear and then brought them back to the trial grounds to sell.



*Land Army Social Event - YMCA, Duke Street, Reading.  
(Marguerite, 2nd left front row)*



Marguerite finally left the Land Army in August 1948 to get married on 4 September to Frank Stimpson who she met in 1941.

All the six girls who originally met up at Blewbury, eventually left by 1949 and went their own separate ways, but they regularly kept in

touch and met every year for their own mini reunions. The Womens Land Army remained in existence after Victory in Europe in May 1945, doing vital jobs on the land until demobilisation was complete and whilst rationing continued. The WLA was formally disbanded in 1950.



June 1944



Pat                      Rene                      Marguerite                      Joan                      Edie

Last reunion in 1999 just after Eileen Seward had died.

## Hall Place, Burchett's Green *March 2009*

In 2008 the Land Army was eventually recognised by the Government when they, and Marguerite among them, were presented with a specially designed badge commemorating their tremendous efforts and service and acknowledging the debt that the country owed to them.





*The Lord Lieutenant of the Royal County of Berkshire*

*welcomes*

*The Women's Land Army & Women's Timber Corps*

*to a Reception in their Honour  
at*

*The Berkshire College of Agriculture*

*Friday 13 March 2009*

*Admit One*

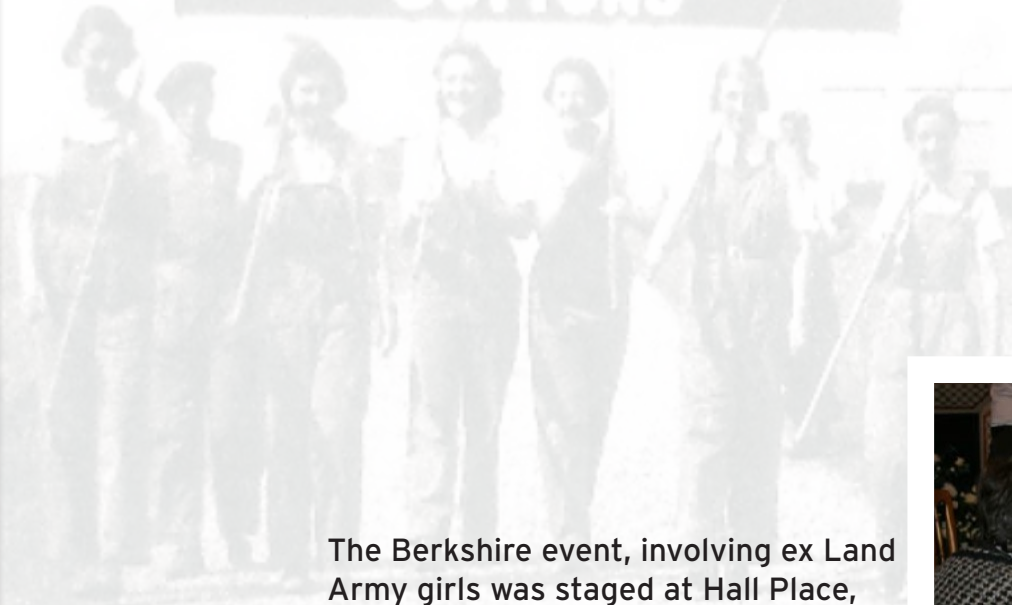
*South Car Park*





*Marguerite at home being interviewed and photographed by the media, March 2009 prior to attending Berkshire's celebratory event at Burchett's Green*

# SUTTONS



The Berkshire event, involving ex Land Army girls was staged at Hall Place, Burchett's Green the home of the Berkshire College of Agriculture on 13th March 2009





# Appendicies



THE RED LION



### Land girls recall their part in war effort at reception

News on the Wall 19/12/19

FORMER Land Girls from across Berkshire were honoured at a reception last Friday.

More than 140 former members of the Women's Land Army who kept Britain fed during the Second World War, attended a reception at the Berkshire College of Agriculture, hosted by the Lord Lieutenant of Berkshire Mary Bayliss.

The women, now all in their 80s and 90s, were called up to work the fields, tend livestock and chop trees when hundreds of thousands of labourers were sent to fight.

Among them was Joan Hunter, aged 86, from Long Lane, Tilehurst, who was called up to work at the Suttons Seeds trial grounds aged 19 in 1941.

Sixty-eight years later, she met with her fellow Land Girl Edith Chauncy at the reception, the pair having stayed in touch throughout their lives.

Mrs Hunter said: "We were the first Land Girls to go to Suttons. We both arrived on our bicycles in the same Land Army uniforms. The foreman put us to work together because we were a bit unsure. There we were, having to work together, and we started talking as ladies do."

For four years they dug the soil, planted seeds, and looked after the plants. In winter, they helped at the Suttons factory in central Reading.

She said: "We were doing our bit for the war effort. There were 80,000 of us Land Girls and I think about 30,000 are still going, so it didn't do us any harm."

She said the Land Girls had reminisced about their experiences at Friday's reception, where they were served tea and cake and introduced to local dignitaries.

Their war efforts went unrecognised for nearly 70 years, until the Government awarded badges and certificates to the surviving Land Girls.





## Armbands denoting length of service

The WLA wore a green and brown work uniform but did not have a rank insignia system in the strictest sense. Instead, the seniority of its members was indicated by way of their armbands. A member would receive one large half diamond for each six months of service to be sown on their armband and then the armband was handed back in order to receive a different one after a set number of year's service.

### *Below are Marguerite's armbands*

The red armband denotes 4 years service + a six months service triangle.

The green armband denotes 2 years service + an additional 3 six months service triangles.





# area REPORTS

## Berkshire and Oxfordshire

As the 75th anniversary of the D-Day invasion of World War Two approaches, a former Land Girl, Marguerite, recalls memories of her life in the Women's Land Army and witnessing the build-up on the home front in 1944.

Nowadays she follows the activities of the Berks and Oxon MVT area with keen interest, however, on 3rd September 1939 when war was declared Marguerite was working for Brooke Bond, Reading, packing tea when her life was about to change. Marguerite reflects on the uncertain and frightening early stages of the war and from being issued with a gas mask, which she had to carry everywhere in case of a gas attack, and homes being provided with an air raid shelter that had to be assembled and dug into the ground in the garden.

At 17 she decided to join the Women's Land Army (WLA) in 1940, as it seemed to offer a healthy outdoor life which appealed to her, and because every way of the various service options allocated for women volunteers. The WLA made a

significant contribution to increasing Britain's food production during and after World War Two. With many male agricultural workers joining the armed forces, women were needed to provide a new rural workforce and by D-Day there were 80,000 'Land Girls'. With their distinctive uniforms they worked

BELOW: Land Girls marching behind a Fordson tractor during a Parade of Fordson tractor workers as part of the Women War Week in Reading, in August 1941. This event was one of many staged around the country in the early stages of the war that were aimed at raising morale.



from dawn to dusk each day, often in all weathers in basic living conditions.

She completed her training at Blewbury, outside Didcot then posted mainly to the Sutton's Seeds establishment, Holme Farm and Trial grounds at Sonning, near Reading in addition to periods at Sutton's other farms in the area. She recalls being taught her daily agricultural duties and the art of ploughing with Shire horses by one of the resident farmers. At Sutton's there were many land girls working throughout the many farms in the area however Marguerite developed close working friendship with five other girls. All six girls who originally met up at Blewbury in 1940 were to become life-long friends after eight years of happy memories in the Women's Land Army.

Marguerite describes the American friendly invasion as though it was yesterday, beginning in 1942 with the seemingly sudden influx of American Air Force GI's from nearby Greenham Common airbase. With most of the British Army overseas the sight of the significant continual increase of American military vehicles of all shapes and sizes going about their business in wartime England made an everlasting impression on her. Marguerite clearly explains that by early 1944 everyone was aware of an increase in military activity, including now British forces with so many military convoys and the storing of equipment in unusual locations that the invasion must be imminent.

This year's events will kindle more memories of those years for Marguerite who will endeavour to participate in commemorations and events.

Richard Stimpson

## BERKSHIRE & OXON



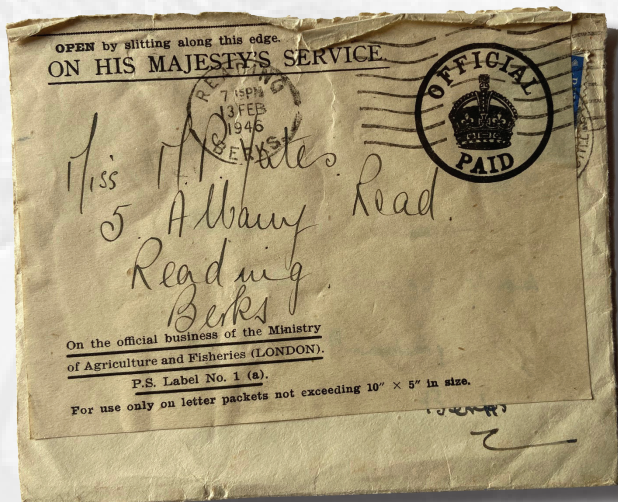
ABOVE: Marguerite and her fellow 'Land Girls' from Suttons joined other members of the Land Army in the Reading area to take part in a morale boosting event in central Reading.

BELOW CENTRE: In 1940, at the age of 17, Marguerite decided to join the Women's Land Army and spent much of her time with Suttons in the Reading area.

BELOW LEFT: Marguerite still has a love for military vehicles and is seen here with one of her particular favourites, a Humber FWD 8cwt 4x4.

BELOW RIGHT: Nowadays Marguerite is taking things a little easier and follows the activities of the MVT Berkshire & Oxfordshire Area with keen interest.





**WOMEN'S LAND ARMY**  
 Berkshire. County Office

Telephone 165 Kings Road.  
 Reading 60194. Reading.

REF/MB/VES/1Y. 14th August. 1946

Dear Miss Yates.

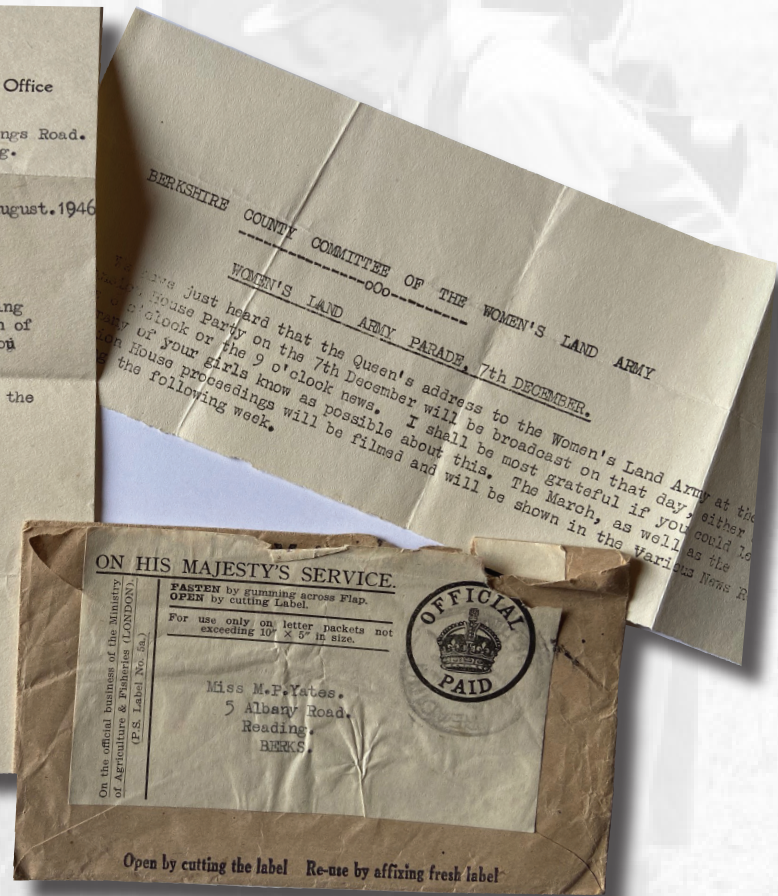
We have much pleasure in sending you your Four Year Armlet in recognition of the four years splendid service which you have rendered in the Women's Land Army.

We do greatly appreciate all the good work you have done.

Yours sincerely,

Chairman.

Miss M.P. Yates.  
 5 Albany Road.  
 Reading.



This is Marguerite's tale of past times working on the land from 1940 to 1948 in the Women's Land Army during and after World War two



November 2009

Revised June 2023

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