

Mary Bott MBE 1924-. Women's Land Army Cardigan

West Wales Veterans' Archive, National Library of Wales

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Description

Born in London in 1924, Mary Bott's parents were from Cardiganshire. Already staying in North Wales at the start of WW2 in September 1939, she remained in Wales for the duration of the war. Initially she worked for the Welsh Board of Health in Cardiff and then by 1944, having been 'called up', elected to join the Women's Land Army and moved to Cardiganshire. During this period of her life which lasted for two years, Mary worked on farms in and around Llangeitho, Llanarth, Tresaith and Rhydlewys, finishing up at a farm in Penparcau by the war's end.

Mary talks vividly about her experiences as a young woman during those days engaging in hard, labour-intensive work, often under harsh conditions, with some very interesting experiences along the way.

Post-war, Mary remained in Ceredigion, becoming a primary school teacher and renowned community volunteer and fundraiser, receiving an MBE for her services to volunteering and the community.

Early Years

Mary Bott (nee Evans) was born in London to Cardiganshire Welsh parents. In 1939 she went to stay with her aunt in North Wales. On 3rd September 1939 war broke out and her mother told her to stay in Wales where it was likely to be safer than returning to London.

Mary completed her education and travelled down to Cardiff where she worked for the Welsh Board of Health. She had wanted to join the Armed Forces but with a brother already in the navy, her uncle told her "to think of your parents" and she followed his advice to stay a civilian. In 1944 Mary was called up and given three options: the Women's Land Army, Ammunitions, or Field Army Nursing Yeomanry.

"I couldn't see me dealing with blood, didn't like the thought of ammunition so I chose the Land Army. I was examined by a panel of ladies – I was very slight, seven stone, and they took one look at me and said 'anaemic'. I replied, 'I can do as good a day's work as anyone!

"I was medically examined by an elderly doctor who didn't use a stethoscope – he put his ears against my bare chest! But I was passed as A1. I went back to the panel and they asked me where I wanted to go; by then my parents had moved back to Blaenafon near Tregaron so I asked for Cardiganshire."

The Women's Land Army in Cardiganshire

"Initially, I was sent to a farm near Llangeitho where the manservant was in hospital. I then went to a farm near Llanarth which had 30 milking cows, and this was where I learnt how to use a milking machine. It was hard work. I used to clear out the muck, make a heap, help with haymaking. I had to get up at 6am in the morning, milk the cows, take the milk to the dairy and then pour it into a container.

"After nearly a year, the farmer read an article that if you milked cows three times a day you would get more milk. Unfortunately, this meant that we had to work shifts and so I was now working morning, afternoon and evening. It meant I could not go anywhere! There were soldiers in Aberaeron and they used to come to dances in Llanarth, but I couldn't go! I asked the farmer and he said 'go out in the afternoon' – but there was nothing on then! I didn't want to stay there so the Land Army sent me to a farm in Tresaith. Another girl and myself did the milking but there was a rat catcher and he used to throw the dead rats at me!

"The Italian prisoners of war from the camp in Henllan used to come and help on the farm near Llanarth. There were about 20 of them and they were driven there in a lorry. When it was raining, they sheltered in the barn and I went down to get a rake and one tall man who spoke a little English asked if I would like to go for a walk with him. You didn't see my feet for dust!

"After three months the farm was sold, and the new owner didn't want Land Girls anymore, so I was sent to a farm near Rhydlewis. This was an utter disaster! The Land Army was supposed to check the farms but in this case they didn't. The farmer – one of two brothers – came to get me at Brynhoffnant, and it was a mile to the farm, and it was pouring with rain. I didn't want to walk so the farmer got a taxi and when he got into the back seat with me put his hand on my leg! There were two brothers and their elderly sister. When I got there, I asked where the toilet was (the ty bach) and they told me outside and round the corner. I was very used to outdoor toilets, but this 'toilet' was in fact a field! When I came back in and they were laughing and they asked, 'was it big enough for you?'

"The brothers hand-milked. I was used to machines and cleaning the cows down. Instead, the brother that milked the cows just took his cap off and wiped the cow's teats! I had to sleep in the same bedroom as the old lady. It was terrible!

"I contacted the Land Army and they sent an organiser from Llandysul. She told the brothers that Land Girls needed a room of their own. The brothers didn't understand English and when she left they asked me what she had said – I told them she was looking for space for evacuees – of course the war was over by then!

"The oven didn't work properly and we mostly ate cawl. There was a long table with a loaf of bread in the middle and we used to sit down to eat with the rabbit trapper and the two brothers – none of them washed.

"I left after a fortnight. Those were the longest two weeks of my life!

“I was then sent to a small farm near Penparcau where they milked 10 cows by hand. The farmer used a pony and trap to deliver the milk. I had to get up at 5.30am and after milking I could smell the bacon and eggs. The farmer was eating them, and I was given porridge!

“It was exhausting – I still today don’t know how I survived! By this time the war had ended and I decided to go to college where I trained to be a teacher.”

Post-War

Post-war, Mary remained in Ceredigion, becoming a primary school teacher. She has also been a highly effective contributor to her local community both as a volunteer and fundraiser and in late 2019 raised funds by having a sponsored silence for the 2020 Ceredigion National Eisteddfod due to have been held in Tregaron.

Mary was honoured with an MBE for her services to volunteering and the community.