

‘The Forgotten Army of the Woods’: The Women’s Timber Corps during the Second World War*

by Emma Vickers

Abstract

The Women’s Timber Corps (WTC) was a little-known subdivision of the Women’s Land Army. Formed officially in April 1942, and composed entirely of women, the Corps was organised to make up for the drift of male forestry workers into the Armed Forces and to assist with the drive to reduce Britain’s unsustainable reliance on imported timber. Given the relative absence of the organisation from official histories of the Second World War, the aim of this article is to reconstruct the form and function of the WTC from its early manifestation in 1917 as the Women’s Forestry Service to its final days in 1946.

In October 2007, a memorial was unveiled in Aberfoyle, Scotland (Figure 1). Cast in bronze, it acknowledges not the sacrifices of the war dead but the civilian contributions of the living, specifically a rapidly shrinking group of veterans known as the Women’s Timber Corps (WTC), a subdivision of the Women’s Land Army (WLA). Between 1940 and 1945 the WTC employed a small, elite cohort of just over 6000 women doing work that previously had only ever been done by men. Members of the Corps worked in nomadic gangs across the length and breadth of England, Wales and Scotland, surveying, clearing and processing Britain’s standing timber into essential wartime commodities. Amongst other things, the women of the WTC helped provide Britain with the timber which was used to create the chestnut ‘railings’ or tracks that were used during the D-Day landings, the telegraph poles that maintained vital lines of communication and the charcoal that created the smokescreen under which the allies were able to cross the Rhine in 1945.¹ The Corps are also credited with keeping the British mining industry alive through the production of pitprops, manufacturing the masts that kept British ships afloat and processing the beech that was used to construct Mosquito aircraft.

Despite the remarkable job undertaken by the WTC, the organisation has received relatively little attention in the histories of the Second World War. Even Gill Clarke’s recent revisionist work on the Women’s Land Army (WLA) makes little more than a passing

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¹ B. Anderson, *We just got on with it* (1994), p. 89. See also The Imperial War Museum, Department of Documents, 88/6/1, memoirs of Mrs D. G. Gardner.



FIGURE 1. Memorial to the Women's Timber Corps by Malcolm Robertson, The Queen Elizabeth Forest Park, Aberfoyle, Scotland. Image used with the permission of the Scottish Forestry Commission.

reference to the Corps.² It is an absence that has been exacerbated by the conflation of the WTC and the WLA organisations in the public mind. On 23 July 2008 for instance, BBC Breakfast reported on the visit of 50 former Land Girls to attend a ceremony at 10 Downing Street to collect their recently organised medallion.³ As the presenters were interviewing a former Land Girl, the screen behind her showed a silent black and white film of the WTC at work. Although this may have mattered little to the BBC, surviving members of the Corps and the Land Army would certainly have noted the disparity between image and dialogue. Indeed, both during the war and after it, members of the WTC were fiercely protective of their unique position and status as independent of (and some might consider, superior to) their Land Army counterparts. While this is clear evidence of a disparity between popular and private constructions of identity, the absence of a contemporary, definitive history of the Women's Timber Corps has maintained the obscurity of the organisation. The WTC, like so many other 'forgotten' organisations of the Second World War (including the Bevin Boys and the women who served within the Home Guard and in Women's Home Defence) has

² J. Clarke, *The Women's Land Army: a portrait* (2008).

³ *The Independent*, 28 Jan. 2008, 'Medals for the 'land girls' of the Second World War' (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/medals-for-the-land-girls-of-the-second-world-war-774862.html>, accessed 12 Mar. 2010).

[independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/medals-for-the-land-girls-of-the-second-world-war-774862.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/medals-for-the-land-girls-of-the-second-world-war-774862.html), accessed 12 Mar. 2010).

suffered from the unflinching attention paid to dominant narratives of the British at war, and specifically, from the veneration traditionally bestowed upon male combatants.⁴ The main purpose of this article is therefore simple; to retrieve the history of the WTC using institutional archives lodged at the National Archives and oral interviews with veterans of the Corps conducted in 2003 and 2004. It begins with an examination of the contribution that was made by the Women's Forestry Service during the First World War.

I

There was nothing new about women working in agriculture. Locally, they had toiled on the land for centuries alongside their male partners and relatives. However, the advent of the First World War in 1914 signalled a huge influx of women into paid employment. Aside from munitions work, nursing and the auxiliary services, women could also volunteer for the Women's Land Army, a process of substitution that helped to counter the drift of farm labourers into the Armed Forces and sustain the flow of home grown produce. By 1918 there were 28,000 women working the land as part of the WLA.⁵ The vast majority of these Land Girls worked on local farms but a small cohort was directed into forestry work under the banner of the Women's Forestry Service (WFS). The organisation was officially formed on 1 August 1917 under the National Service Department, initially employing 25 measurers and 20 timber cutters.⁶ Measurers were taught to assess the volume of standing timber and calculate the cubic capacity of each tree. Their work was relatively sedentary in comparison to the job of the timber cutter, who were trained at camps in Nottinghamshire and Suffolk where they learnt to fell and process standing timber.⁷ The first four months of the fledgling WFS were difficult for two reasons. Owing to the demand for female labour from other industries, the organisation was barely able to expand its ranks. The timber industry was also slow in calling on the women already serving in the organisation to assist their operations. However, by early 1918, demand for timber and labour both began to rise. By the time hostilities ceased later that year, the WFS had employed 2000 women who, with the help of 43 battalions of Canadian Forestry Corps, had surveyed, stripped and processed over 450,000 acres of woodland.⁸ In addition to these 'official' workers, there were at least 1000 other women who, while not formally registered with the WFS, were employed in local forests and sawmills.⁹ Despite the apparent success of the organisation, the official historian of timber production in the Second World War, Russell Meiggs, described the WFS as 'rough and ready'. Indeed, he believed that the revival of the organisation in 1940 and the widespread substitution of women for male timber workers would not have succeeded had the government not stepped in and set up the WTC on firmer foundations than its predecessor.¹⁰

While the First World War may have provided ample evidence that women could work effectively in forestry, it also demonstrated Britain's acute inability to generate enough of its

⁴ See P. Summerfield and C. M. Peniston-Bird, *Contesting Home Defence* (2008).

⁵ V. Sackville West, *The Women's Land Army* (1944), p. 9.

⁶ TNA, F18/230, C. W. Bird, 'Supply and Control'.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ R. Meiggs, *Home timber production, 1939-45* (1949), p. 194.

own timber. In peacetime, stocks of timber came almost exclusively from the Empire and other overseas suppliers. Reducing this import dependency was not easy. As we have seen, although small amounts of timber were being produced on home soil, in the First World War France was charged with providing the bulk of the supply, thereby replacing the need for timber from the Baltic. It was a situation which could not be replicated in the event of another war, not least given the cost of importing timber and the growth of aerial warfare. With this in mind, the problem of future supply was tackled by the Acland Committee, which was formed in 1918 as a sub-committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction. Its report led to the establishment of the Forestry Commission in 1919 as a state forestry authority which was responsible for afforestation and increasing the production of timber on home soil. This was far from an easy task. By 1939, Britain had become the largest wood-importing country in the world.¹¹ On average, only four per cent of the timber consumed was produced on home soil.¹² The gravity of this continued reliance did not go unnoticed. On the eve of the Second World War, one correspondent writing in *The Times* warned that, 'should this country be engaged in a major war in the next few years, she will be in a much less advantageous position for timber supplies than in 1914'.¹³ Timber that should have been reaching maturity in 1939 had been felled prematurely over the course of the First World War and post-war efforts to replant woodland had mostly not yet come to fruition.

When the Second World War began in September 1939, two of the most vital requirements were beech wood, which was used in the production of aircraft, and pitprops for the mining industry. It was this latter commodity which caused ministers within the Ministry of Supply the most anxiety. At the beginning of 1940 it was estimated that stocks of pitwood would last for a maximum of seven months. The severity of the shortage required a rapid increase of timber production at home, something which could only be achieved by an accurate survey of Britain's standing timber and a rapid increase in the workforce able to process existing stocks. A census undertaken in 1942, revealed a high quantity of coniferous woods which could be turned into pitprops.¹⁴ Landowners would also play their part and surrender their woodland to the war effort. All that was now required was an increase in personnel.

II

In common with other aspects of wartime organisation, the outbreak of war in 1939 was met with a prepared restoration of the structures and institutions which had evolved during the First World War. Initially, female timber workers were directed into forestry through the WLA. The WTC was not formed as a separate entity until April 1942. Scotland was the first area of the country to mobilise the new workers, including a small cohort of Land Girls who had already trained as telegraph pole selectors. In these early days, the WLA was reluctant to advertise the possibility of forestry work to potential recruits into the Land Army because of the poor

¹¹ 'Woodlands in the War', *The Times*, 24 Dec. 1940, p. 40.

¹² Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 1.

¹³ 'Timber in wartime British supplies, from wooden

walls to ARP', *The Times*, 19 Aug. 1939, p. 11.

¹⁴ 'Woodlands in the War', p. 40. See also *Meet the members: a record of the Women's Timber Corps* (1944), pp. 34-8.

response from women volunteers to work on the land. It was their fear that 'if an alternative of forestry is offered, it will make the land work even less attractive'.¹⁵ Farmwork was considered to be one of the least prestigious wartime occupations for women and the WLA struggled to attract new members into its ranks. The Corps, on the other hand, was deemed to be different, exciting and an adventurous alternative to land work.¹⁶ For this reason, forestry work was never widely advertised and the recruitment of women as measurers and pole selectors continued on an internal (and largely informal) basis until 1942, as and when a request was filed by a timber merchant. The main body of the timber industry was sustained by the male sawyers, tractor and lorry drivers, hauliers, fellers and saw doctors, all of whom had been reserved from military service in 1939. They were joined by 860 Territorials and a multi-national contingent of forestry workers from Canada, Australia, British Honduras, and Britain.¹⁷ The ranks were topped up by a motley crew of friendly 'aliens', conscientious objectors, university students, seasonal workers and schoolboys over fifteen, the latter working for a minimum of three weeks and doing everything from sawing timber to light felling work.¹⁸ Prisoners of war were also employed; in 1942, 3,000 Italians were integrated into timber production¹⁹ and, by 1945, it was noted that 45,000 Germans were employed in agriculture and forestry.²⁰ Despite the complaints lodged by local Parish Councils and members of the public over the freedom granted to these men, their employment was, according to the MP Sir Alfred Knox, preferable to 'keeping them in camps, eating their heads off and doing nothing'.²¹ In practice, their employment was not always welcomed by the Corps. They were thought to receive better treatment than their female co-workers, including larger rations and a more consistent supply of vital equipment, including Wellington boots.²²

In these early days, and despite a clear demand for labour and timber, the number of women recruited into forestry work was relatively small. At the close of 1941, 3,800 women were working alongside 16,900 men.²³ In part, the limited impact of women in the early part of the war was due to the unwillingness of the authorities to establish a permanent women's service, something which might have facilitated a greater level of cooperation between the exclusively male timber trade and female workers. Meiggs firmly believed that a separate, permanent service was 'not acceptable to the authorities'²⁴ even though necessity demanded it. This was

¹⁵ TNA, F18/230, Note by the Chairman of the Forestry Commission, Mr Wynne Jones, 15 June 1939.

¹⁶ Rita Pullen and Dorothy Lee interviewed by Emma Vickers, 14 Nov. 2003.

¹⁷ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 140 and W. C. Wonders, 'The Canadian Forestry Corps in Scotland during World War Two', *Scottish Geographical Magazine* 103 (1987), p. 21.

¹⁸ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 143. See also 'Children on the land, help or hindrance?' *The Times*, 1 Aug. 1940, p. 6.

¹⁹ TNA, WO 199/407, letter from the Director of Prisoners of War to the War Office, 20 Feb. 1942.

²⁰ Parliamentary Debates (hereafter PD), Commons, 410 col. 667, reply from Sir J. Grigg, 24 Apr. 1945.

²¹ TNA, WO 199/409, Summary of objections to use for unescorted German POW, App. A, 103 and PD, Commons, 410 col. 667 reply from Sir A. Knox, 24 Apr. 1945.

²² Some prisoners of war received Wellington boots before the WTC and WLA. The issue was discussed in the House of Commons, PD, Commons, 385, col. 1298, 3 Dec. 1942. See also Richard Moore-Colyer's comments in 'Prisoners of war and the struggle for food production, 1939-49', in B. Short, C. Watkins and J. Martin, *The frontline of freedom: British farming in the Second World War* (2007), p. 119.

²³ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 307.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

largely because of the inherent danger and physicality of forestry work. Put bluntly, it was deemed to be no job for a woman. In 1940 the Forestry Commission sought to examine this assumption more thoroughly by conducting a survey of women already working in forestry in order to assess the potential productivity of an all-female operation. The report conceded that female forestry workers could indeed make an effective contribution, albeit a less able one than their male counterparts when it came to the heavier aspects of forestry. It concluded for instance that while the 'nimble fingers' of female planters cost fourteen per cent less than if the work had been completed by a man, heavier work like notch planting cost 67 per cent more than the normal cost for men's labour.²⁵ There was still, however, ample evidence to suggest that women could make a significant contribution to lighter, less strenuous forestry work should they be employed in greater numbers.

It is perhaps not surprising that it was the Battle of the Atlantic, which began in 1941, rather than the cautious green light offered by the Forestry Commission, which prompted the official formulation of the WTC in April 1942. Unlike the Women's Land Army, which came under the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, the WTC came under the jurisdiction of the Home Grown Timber Production Department of the Ministry of Supply (known in peacetime as the Forestry Commission). The nucleus of the Corps was formed by 1,200 women in England, Wales and Scotland who were already working for the Home Grown Timber Production Department and for timber merchants under the auspices of the WLA. When local recruitment officially began in March 1942, the promise of a wartime career in forestry proved to be an attractive prospect. Indeed, the promise of travel, better hours than the regular Land Army and a more generous pay scale ensured that the Corps was never short of recruits. Around 250 women a month between the ages of 18 and 35 volunteered for the Corps.²⁶ They were an incongruous crop of women composed of, amongst others, university graduates, sales assistants and ballet dancers. In Scotland the ranks were reportedly strengthened by an unnamed tennis star and a group of Hebridean fish workers.²⁷ It was a diversity that fascinated the trainers entrusted with looking after the women. Bonny Macadam joined the WTC in 1942 and quickly became a trainer at Shandford Lodge, near Brechin in Angus. She vividly recalled a cohort of rookies stepping off the train at Brechin station. 'There were so many townies – shop assistants, hairdressers ... you name them. They had high heels, hats with veils ... absolutely incredible!'²⁸ Unlike most of the young women she was employed to look after, Bonny was slightly better prepared for life in the WTC. As the daughter of a wealthy malt extract magnate, she had learnt how to handle an axe and drive heavy vehicles on the family estate before the outbreak of war. It was a training that most 'townies' could only dream of.

Primary accounts of the selection process for the WTC suggest that a higher academic standard was required for applicants in comparison to women entering the WLA.²⁹ All recruits were required to sit a basic mathematics exam to decide which women should be trained as

²⁵ TNA, F18/230, Forestry Commission report on the output of female forestry workers, 15 Aug. 1940.

²⁶ *Meet the members*, p. 6.

²⁷ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 195.

²⁸ Bonny Macadam quoted in J. Gilchrist, 'So what

did you do in the war, mummy?' *The Scotsman*, 18 Feb. 2000.

²⁹ See M. Williams, *Lumber Jill* (1994) p. 8 and N. Tyrer, *They fought in the fields* (1996), p. 152.



FIGURE 2. Recruits at Culford Camp, Suffolk, 3 August 1940.

Source: Author's own collection.

measurers. In terms of physicality, there is little evidence to suggest that women were recruited on the basis of their stature or physical strength. Enthusiasm, resilience and good humour were deemed to be more important, although there is some evidence to suggest that women were directed into areas of work that would best suit their stature. Betty Hansford, a veteran of the WTC, described herself as 'small and slightly built'. The doctor who conducted Betty's medical laughed at her desire to join the organisation but, since she possessed no physical impairment which prevented her from 'having a go', she did just that, and served out her time in the Corps as a measurer.³⁰

In England, all new recruits were sent to training at camps in Culford (Figure 2), Wetherby, Hereford and Lydney for a month's training in timber and its production. They learnt how to identify trees and measure woodland, how to select trees for telegraph poles and how to fell, haul and process standing timber. Once the month's training was over, each woman was directed into the area of production in which they had shown the most progress and sent either to work for the Forestry Commission or the timber trade.

Of all the 'specialists', measurers were the most highly prized members of the service, described as being 'drawn from a different type of girl altogether'³¹ and as being 'the brains of the outfit'.³² Their work demanded precision and accuracy; potential sites had to be assessed for volume, extraction routes and stacking grounds and each tree was measured for its cubic

³⁰ Betty Hansford interviewed by Emma Vickers, 14 May 2003.

³¹ TNA, MAF 900/162, letter from Miss B. G. Brew, WLA Headquarters to Mrs Crowther, County Secretary

of Chester, 5 Jan. 1940.

³² P. Parker, 'The rewards of hard labour' in M. Nicholson, *What did you do during the War?* (1995) p. 45.

capacity by sight with the aid of a Hoppus Ready Reckoner (a guide which allowed measurers to estimate accurately the amount of timber that a tree would yield).³³ It was on the basis of the measurers' calculations that the fellers were paid.

As 'the brains of the outfit', measurers were sometimes singled out by their co-workers as possessing an inflated sense of self-worth. Two of my interviewees, Eileen Marsden and Pat Rouse, spoke of their mutual dislike for a particular measurer that they encountered during the war.

EM: I always remember meeting another member of the WTC and asking what she did, and she said [imitates a middle class accent] 'Oh, I'm a measurer.'

PR: Oh they were toffee-nosed weren't they? I shouldn't say this but they were people that came from universities.³⁴

As another interviewee, Gwenda Huff, recalled, a certain amount of 'cat calling' occurred between the two groups. 'Measurers seemed to think they were different. Perhaps it was because if their measurements were not correct the fellers' wages were wrong'.³⁵ This sense of difference – which was often compounded by class – was exacerbated by the higher pay packets received by the measurers. Internal rivalries such as these were arguably part and parcel of life in the Corps. The curious mix of inexperienced urbanites, country dwellers and university-educated women that made up the organisation imbued it with an unrivalled sense of uniqueness.

By December 1943, there were 8500 women working for the Forestry Commission and the timber trade.³⁶ It did not take long for members of the Corps to develop a strong organisational identity, many of whom expressed pride at their unique role and presumed superiority over their Land Army sisters. Unlike members of WLA, women in the WTC were tied to the service by an Essential Work Order, an agreement that prevented the drift of women from forestry into higher paid but less important work. It decreed that once recruited, members of the Corps could not withdraw from the service without the permission of the Ministry of Labour. It was a bind that prompted some members of the Corps to behave snobbishly towards the Land Army. Eileen Kennedy, for instance, jokingly described the WTC as the 'Rolls Royce of the Land Army'.³⁷ Likewise, a veteran of the Corps who was interviewed for the Tyne Tees series *Flashbacks* believed that the WTC were in a different class altogether. Asked by the presenter to elucidate, she explained that 'The WTC wasn't the WLA. We wouldn't be classed with the WLA. People didn't believe what you were doing and you just felt that little bit better'.³⁸ Some veterans of the Corps also believed that they possessed higher morals than their Land Army counterparts. In a clear reference to the crudely modified Land Army slogan 'Backs to the Land', four of my respondents claimed that while the WTC did not conduct sexual relationships with POWs, Land Girls had no such scruples.

³³ Personal memoirs of Marjorie Ridgley, collection of the author, 10 Mar. 2003.

³⁴ Pat Rouse and Eileen Marsden interviewed by Emma Vickers, 6 Mar. 2003.

³⁵ Gwenda Huff interviewed by Emma Vickers, 5 Apr. 2003.

³⁶ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 307.

³⁷ Eileen Lloyd interviewed by Emma Vickers, 14 Mar. 2003.

³⁸ Joan Slassor, *Flashbacks*, Tyne Tees Television, 2 Dec. 1994.

Pay was also a bone of contention between the two groups. Women in the Corps worked on a system of piece-work, unlike women in the WLA who worked for a set salary. On average, this granted the Corps a higher overall wage than the Land Army; some 50s. per week, a figure which was 'considerably above the Land Army minimum'.³⁹ The final point of separation from the WLA was the uniform of the WTC; although there was little difference in the walking-out breeches, shoes and jumpers worn by both sets of women, members of the WTC wore a green beret (much envied by their Land Army sisters⁴⁰) and a cap badge composed of a fir tree surmounted by a royal crown. Women who worked as fellers were also distinguished by a badge composed of two crossed axes, worn on the sleeve, a badge adopted from the light infantry division of the Pioneer Corps. Coloured armbands designated women who had stayed within the service for two years or more.

Of all the jobs performed by the WTC, felling was undoubtedly the most complex and physically demanding. Women worked with axes weighing between 4½ lbs to 7 lbs felling trees which frequently topped 80 feet in height.⁴¹ Once a 'dip' or 'v' shaped wedge had been chopped out of the base of the tree, women worked in pairs on a double handed saw, 'cross-cutting' into the tree until it was ready to fall. Once felled, the tree underwent a process called 'snedding' whereby its branches were trimmed back to the trunk. Each tree was then cut into lengths and loaded up to be taken to the local sawmill for processing. The final part of the process was undertaken by the measurers, who calculated rates of pay based upon the amount of timber that was felled.

For most women, the inherent physicality of life in the forests had a transformative effect on their bodies. It was not unusual for work to begin with anything up to a 20 mile cycle ride.⁴² Fellers wielded axes weighing up to seven pounds, operated cross cut saws and loaded timber by hand. They also drove tractors and lorries and worked in sawmills which, even by the standards of the 1940s, were considered to be exceptionally dangerous. Accidents were a routine aspect of life in the WTC and included broken legs from horses that bolted while hauling timber; bronchitis caused by the inhalation of sawdust; and amputated fingers, which were most commonly sustained by women working in the sawmills. A small number of women were killed when trees fell the wrong way during the felling process. In the winter months conditions became even more testing, not least for those who lived and worked in the forests of Scotland, bedding down at night in makeshift huts, breaking the ice on top of the water in order to wash in the morning and forced to walk, cycle or hitchhike to civilisation.⁴³ Aside from hands and feet that were constantly blistered, some women contracted tuberculosis while others developed joint pain and rheumatism from working in the cold. Lilian Sykes (Figure 3) was nearly blinded in one eye while chopping wood. It was an injury that eventually forced her resignation from the Corps.

Disability, illness and isolation were not the only downsides of the job. By its very nature, life in the Corps was also extremely transient and nomadic: once a particular patch of woodland

³⁹ TNA MAF 900/162, circular 101 from G. Denman to WLA County Secretaries and WLA County Chairmen, 10 Feb. 1942.

⁴⁰ See J. Mant, *All muck and no medals* (1995), p. 323.

⁴¹ R. Millard, 'Hail, fellers, well met again', *Life and Times*, 20 May 1992.

⁴² *Meet the members*, p. 34.

⁴³ Millard, 'Hail, fellers, well met again'.



FIGURE 3. Lilian Sykes, July 1940.

Source: Author's own collection.

had been surveyed, felled and manufactured into useable commodities, work began on another area of standing timber. In her first two years of working in the WTC, Pat Younghusband worked in over 80 different locations. Each move meant a new billet and, often, a new set of workmates.⁴⁴ However, the women of the Corps proved themselves to be more than up to the task. Despite the Forestry Commission's prediction that women would largely be confined to lighter jobs like planting, women fellers played a crucial part in activities of the organisation. Meiggs referred to a few 'female Amazons who rivalled men'⁴⁵ and, likewise, in 1942, James Tait wrote an article in the *Scottish Forestry Journal* which described a memorable encounter with a group of Lumberjills in Scotland. 'I have to admit that a mere man will have to take care if he is to be recognised as a forester in future. The woman in charge could lay a tree with the best of men and it is some considerable time since I saw anyone so knacky [proficient] in the handling of an axe'.⁴⁶

The 'mere men' who worked alongside the Corps (some 51,700 by 1944) did not all accept the influx of women into the timber trade with generosity.⁴⁷ As Figure 4 suggests, women were a minority presence in an industry which had always been heavily dominated by men. Kay Evans, a veteran of the Corps, believed that the Forestry Commission 'would never have admitted women unless [it was] forced to'.⁴⁸

Personal testimony seems to substantiate Kay's observation. When Muriel Ward presented herself to the manager of the sawmill to which she had been allocated, he informed her that he had 'never wanted women working for me, but I suppose nothing can be done about it now'.⁴⁹ The manager's resignation to the situation was all too common in the private timber trade. Similarly, Pat Rouse described her foreman as a 'devil' yet she was determined to prove her worth. 'The attitude was that women can't do anything. You could see it on the men's faces.

⁴⁴ Letter from P. Young husband to Emma Vickers, 8 July 2003.

⁴⁵ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 202.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Anderson, *We just got on with it*, p. 90.

⁴⁷ Meiggs, *Home timber production*, p. 307.

⁴⁸ Kay Evans interviewed by Emma Vickers, 6 May 2003.

⁴⁹ Muriel Ward cited in 'The other "Green Berets"', *Nottingham Evening Post*, 20 Mar. 1995.



FIGURE 4. Lyth Valley Sawmill, 1943.

Source: Author's own collection.

But they grew to get the idea'.⁵⁰ Indeed, it did not take long for the industry to recognise the value of the women who were sent to assist them. The Corps quickly established themselves as 'grafters' who were not afraid of hard work in all weathers.⁵¹

While some members of the WTC were forced to prove their worth to a highly sceptical and exclusively male industry, the press needed less persuasion of their value. In one article from the *The Leader*, published in 1942, 'smiling beauties' are pictured in turbans and rolled up dungarees carrying logs and wistfully staring into the horizon. Owing to the inherent novelty of former shop assistants and office workers felling trees, it is perhaps not surprising that the author chose to focus on the juxtaposition between pre-war and wartime roles of the Corps. The article begins with the incredulous tagline

Shiver my timbers! What's going on here? Girls felling trees? Sawing them up? Carrying them about on their shoulders? Yes, it's all just as you see it. For this is Britain, 1942. The Britain where women are now taking over men's jobs everywhere – and making a success of them. Even the most strenuous ones – like that of these hardy forestry girls.⁵²

The author went on to contrast the previous work of the Corps in 'comfortable shops and offices' to their new, temporary lives as Lumberjills.⁵³

A similar angle was taken in an article published in the *Cornish Times* in 1944. The author described a typical day in the life of an eleven-strong gang and goes on to explore the contrast between life in the Corps and the sedentary pace of peacetime.

Miss Muriel (Killer) Berry was ... a shop assistant ... in Halifax. Her department had been ladies lingerie, and she remarked chopping tree-trunks and handling ladies' underclothing are just as extreme as can be imagined. But she really liked the job, although after the war she looks forward to something a little less energetic.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Pat Rouse interviewed by Emma Vickers, 6 Mar. 2003.

⁵¹ Millard, 'Hail, fellers, well met again'.

⁵² 'Down in the Forest', *The Leader*, 17 Oct. 1942.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Cited in Williams, *Lumber Jill*, pp. 94–6.



FIGURE 5. The 'Woodland Chorus Girls', Witherslack, date unknown.

Source: Author's own collection.

Those dreaming for a less strenuous life did not have long to wait. As early as 1943, the Corps began to wind down its activities. Timber production had reached a peak and reserves of standing timber began to shrink. It was a period of consolidation for the WTC when work and welfare became more organised. By 1945, and upon the cessation of hostilities in Europe, married women and those with domestic responsibilities were free to leave the WTC or transfer into under-resourced occupations such as teaching and nursing. A year later, in 1946, the organisation was officially disbanded. Like the rest of the Land Army, members of the WTC were classed as civilians and did not receive any post-war training or gratuity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the prospects for women wishing to stay within forestry were bleak; those men who had not been reserved from service returned home from the Armed Forces and reclaimed their peacetime jobs. However, a small number of women were employed on the National Census of Woodlands to assess the amount of standing timber that remained.⁵⁵ Others were offered the chance to work in Canada and Germany, requisitioning equipment from the sawmills and undertaking secretarial work for the Control Commission in the North German Timber Control, which was organising timber supplies and re-forestation.⁵⁶ The scarcity of post-war jobs in forestry forced the vast majority of the Corps back into their peacetime roles. However, for many of the 6000 women who served as foresters during the war, life had changed for the better.

For those who had grown up in the 1930s, constrained by the ties of family and education, the Corps provided autonomy, self-sufficiency and friendship (Figure 5). Many left the organisation with a deep and abiding love for the forests, some with a greater sense of freedom and purpose and most with bodies that were stronger and fitter than their pre-war manifestations. They are privileges which for most veterans, outweighed both the hardships of the job and the infirmity in later life, particularly for fellers, caused by the physicality of felling and the harsh conditions that they faced in the winter months. As for Britain, it had emerged from a war of self-sufficiency scarred, but intact. Without the efforts of an elite cohort of female foresters, it might have fared far worse.

⁵⁵ Betty Long interviewed by Emma Vickers, 21 Mar. 2003.

⁵⁶ A. Gray, *Timber!* (1998) p. 49.