

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee(s): Mrs Laura Briggs

Date of birth:

Place of birth:

Interviewer(s): David Callister

Recorded by: David Callister

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Topic(s): Women’s Land Army
Knockaloe Farm
Working on different farms
Sunday School picnics
Shorthorn breed of cattle
Introduction of an *Alpha Levall* milking machine
Girls Friendly Society
Wages and allowances for Land Girls
Thinning kale and turnips
Travel by bus or tram
Conscription of Land Girls
Local entertainment
Riot by internees at *Knockaloe Camp*
Parade to promote the Women’s Land Army
Lord Granville and Lady Rose
Gratuities and extra clothing coupons

Laura Briggs - Mrs B

David Callister - DC

DC This is an interview with Laura Briggs, and we're at *Ballakilmartin* to talk about the Women's Land Army and the Land Girls in the Isle of Man. Of course you wrote this very, very interesting article and documented as much as you can of the Land Army for the Island, some long time ago, and it is a long time ago now, I suppose, memories get a bit dim, do they, or how does it come back to you, is it still fresh in your mind, those days that you spent in the Land Army?

Mrs B Oh, they're more vivid than what I did yesterday.

DC Are they?

Mrs B They really are and, well, it was a breaking in period because I was quite young when I joined the Land Army, I was at school, at sixteen, and met Mr Howie, as I'd come out of an office, the old Victoria House, oh, no, Victory House, and came out, going down to catch the bus home to Laxey, met Mr Howie, whom I knew quite well, and he asked me to see what I was doing. I told him I'd been applying for a job, and he said, 'Well, there's no need for you to apply for a job, come and join my Women's Land Army.' And that's how it happened.

DC Well, George Howie was in charge of *Knockaloe*, in fact, was he?

Mrs B He was the Agricultural Organiser.

DC Well, from what you've written about it, it seemed to me that he had a devil's own job getting enough people to join the Land Army.

Mrs B Oh, it was very difficult. I think I was the fifth, they had started in May of 1941, to try and recruit girls, and I was the fifth, and I started at *Knockaloe* on 3rd September of that year. He let me have my holidays, my school holidays, before sending word that I was to arrive at *Knockaloe* at 7 o'clock on 3rd September, which was a Monday.

DC So you remember that quite well.

Mrs B Oh, I remember that very well.

DC Who would have been at *Knockaloe* at that time, then, many people or just a few?

Mrs B Oh, well, there were the regular men that were kept there and there was the poultry unit, run by Miss Annie Kneen, and she had helpers, I can't honestly remember how many, whether it was one or two. And then there was, like every other farm, there were the horse men, the cowman – they didn't actually have a dairy herd as such, but they bred the cows and calves. And one strange thing that I remember, and it has cropped up recently, was the fact that I was there when they were threshing the grass for the seeds. I suppose it was to supplement the seeds they needed for sowing at *Knockaloe*, I'm not sure, I can't – I never knew whether they were going to sell them or what they were going to do with them, but the children were allowed out from school in those days to collect cocksfoot and someone was asking about it and I was saying that I'd seen it threshed there, at *Knockloe*.

DC How did they thresh that, with the mill?

Mrs B With the mill, yes.

DC In the same way as the corn would be dealt with.

Mrs B Yes, just the same, and I wasn't there at the mill, I was supposedly learning to milk at *Shenvalley*, just across the road from *Knockaloe*, Mr Pete Kelly's farm.

DC So you'd never seen a cow before this, had you?

Mrs B Oh, no, I could milk.

DC Oh, you knew how to do it, did you?

Mrs B I spent all my holidays down at the *Barony* Farm, and that's where I got to know Mr Howie, because he was friendly with the manager down there, Mr Roberts, and my uncle was the stockman down there, so I used to love going down there. I've spent every holiday down, but I actually did learn to milk at my brother-in-law's farm.

DC Well, one of the adverts said applications were invited for the membership of the MWLA, that would be the Manx Women's Land Army, for work on farms within the Island. Members may be placed individually on farms, or may be organised as mobile squads. Now, were you ever in a mobile squad?

Mrs B Oh, no, I spent, it must have been four or five weeks at *Knockaloe*, I started on 3rd September and during October, I really can't remember the date, I was taken down to see Mr Eddie Kneen, at *Ballamona*, Ballaugh, where I was to spend the next four years. And I was left down there just to let us get to know each other, and I'd been given a voucher to travel back to St. Johns on the train. I don't know how Mr Kneen got it, but he took me up to the station at Ballaugh in a car, because petrol was very hard to come by in those days, and from St Johns I walked home to Patrick, because of course there were no buses running out at that time, and the next day I was told I could have – that happened on Thursday of the week, and the next day I was told I could home and have a long weekend before going down to Ballaugh.

DC Where you started work?

Mrs B Yes. Now Ballaugh, to me, was the other side of the moon, because we didn't travel very much in those days, I mean the most we travelled were usually on the Sunday School picnics, and that wasn't one of the routes that our Sunday School picnics ever took. But the people were very friendly all round the district and if ever you were in trouble they would help out.

DC So you'd be living in on the farm then?

Mrs B I lived in, yes.

DC So what did they give you, just, you'd have a room to sleep in, did you?

Mrs B Oh, yes, oh, yes, I was family, I was, I lived ...

DC Regarded as one of the family.

Mrs B Oh, yes, I lived as family, worked as a man, but lived as family.

DC So here you are at sixteen, or just over, working as a man then.

Mrs B Well, yes, well, trying to.

DC What sort of work were they putting you to first of all?

Mrs B Oh, well, I arrived down there in October, they had actually lifted the potatoes but had to get up at – we started at quarter to six in the morning, and hand milked. By this time it was dark, no electricity on the farms in those days and we didn't have running water. Well, we did have a certain amount of water.

DC What did you have for light in the cow sheds, then?

Mrs B Lanterns, lanterns, and we used to have to get going, feed kale, the mixture of oats and whatever else you were lucky enough to have, crushed, and we'd a hammer mill down there and crushed the grain ourselves. I never did that work, that was too heavy to swing the engine for the hammer mill. But there was the mucking out to do first before we started to milk and then we all sat down, there were the three of us, there was Mr Kneen, there was Louis Corkill, who was the horse man and myself, and when I went down there they had sixteen cows, he had very good cows, actually, beautiful *Shorthorns*, and good milkers, and we milked those and then went for breakfast, which was about quarter past eight. In the summer time, of course, we had to put the cows out, before we went for our breakfast, and the mucking out had to be done, as I say. And *Ballamona* was a lovely farm, it was square, and in the middle of the square was the 'midden,' and as the winter went on, of course the pile got higher and higher ...

DC Yeah.

Mrs B ... and we had to go up planks with the wheelbarrows ...

DC Of course, yes. (*laughter*)

Mrs B ... and if it had been wet, or if it had been frosty the nights before, you often enough landed up with your face ...

DC In it?

Mrs B ... in the barrow.

DC Oh, in the barrow.

Mrs B Well, in what was *in* the barrow, because your feet went from underneath you when it was getting sloping (*laughter*) oh! but I mean there was only one thing

about it, it was warm. It was warm in the barrow. (*laughter*)

DC After you'd done this milking – I mean how much would there be in a milk pail, you'd be using pails to milk into, would you?

Mrs B Yes, buckets, but quite shortly, Mr Kneen got a milking machine, an *Alpha Levall*, and he did the milking in the morning and Louis and myself did all the rest of the feeding because we had the beeves to feed, we had pigs, and Louis, of course, would be getting his horses ready to go out onto the field, and in the afternoon, it was left to me to do the milking, once we had the milking machines.

DC That would save you a lot of time, then, would it, or would it?

Mrs B Yes, but I would rather hand milk.

DC Would you?

Mrs B Yes.

DC Why?

Mrs B Always have.

DC You enjoyed it then.

Mrs B You get a sort of friendship with the cows and I know there's been quite a lot on the television how music will soothe the cows, but we knew years ago that if you sing to cows they'll give more milk, and they're happy.

DC Really – so were you singing to the cows when you were milking?

Mrs B Oh, yes, I'd be singing and sometimes we'd put on concerts down and put plays on. Miss Burgess, Miss Freda Burgess used to help run the Girls Friendly Society at the church and Mrs Elliot, the rector's wife, and I would learn my lines and recite them – in the afternoons – I couldn't do it in the mornings, of course, but when I was there in the cow shed I would be talking to the cows.

DC So did the yield drop when they had milking machines, then, rather than hand?

Mrs B Oh, no, no.

DC So that wouldn't make any difference.

Mrs B No, no, so long as ...

DC But a good sing song would help ...

Mrs B If you're a good milker, you're a good milker for ever whether it's by machine or by hand, and I used to love to milk, well I mean ...

DC Well, what sort of things were you singing to them?

Mrs B Oh, all the popular songs, we always sang at home, that was the only sort of ...

DC Entertainment?

Mrs B ... yes, the entertainment that we could get, because there was no radio when I was a child, and no television, of course. And my eldest sister was the pianist and my grandfather used to bring books, musical books from the shows, he'd get them because he was fond of music too, and we'd be round the piano singing, singing hymns and singing songs, and I mean it was no bother. You can get the rhythm of the song when you're milking.

DC Can you?

Mrs B Yes.

DC So some songs were better than others for milking?

Mrs B Oh, yes, I mean you wouldn't have a slow one.

DC So there you are then, you're out on the farm, you're away from *Knockaloe*, you're not with the groups that were going round the Island, would you be getting paid for all this work?

Mrs B Well, we were paid ... when I started down there we were paid 18 shillings a week, and what was allowed for our keep was 22 shillings.

DC Would that go to the farmer?

Mrs B I don't know how it worked actually – I think it was just the allowance. I don't think they were paid anything – that was just the allowance so that the wage looked better.

DC And what would you do with 18 shillings, was that enough to get you through the week, was it?

Mrs B Well, before we had uniform, it went towards keeping, well, Wellingtons and heavier clothing. In fact at first I had my father's overalls, my Mum cut them down for me and as he was quite a tall man, he was nearly six foot, and I'm about 5ft. 4, she had quite a lot of work to do, and I used to tie them round the middle, tie them in quite a bit, and I must have looked a peculiar sort of scarecrow as I was going out into the field with the horse and cart.

DC So there you are then, 18 bob a week, less than a pound, and no extra, I mean did you get overtime pay or anything?

Mrs B No overtime, but in the summer time when the turnips and the kale needed thinning and they would possibly get ahead of us, we were encouraged to go out at night, after a full day, thinning, and we would get sixpence a hundred yards for thinning turnips, and seven pence for thinning kale.

DC That was well paid, a hundred yards for sixpence, wasn't it?

Mrs B Not really, it's hard work.

DC How long would it take you to thin a hundred yards?

Mrs B The way we went, we went quite fast, but you didn't have to leave any weeds behind, you just didn't.

DC So you could earn a bit of extra money that way, then?

Mrs B Just a bit. I mean it didn't last all that long because we were out in the field thinning for days on end, so long as the weather was good.

DC So you could be put onto one job and be on it all day long then, could you?

Mrs B Yes, oh yes, except for coming in and fixing up, as they called feeding and milking the cows in the afternoon.

DC Was there anything you hated doing on a farm? Anything you said, 'Oh, I could do without that.'

Mrs B Hay time, the seeds got everywhere, and I mean literally everywhere, and of course it was always in the hot weather that we were doing the hay and it would get on your hair, it would stick to you and they were itchy, the seeds were itchy, I don't like the hot weather at all, so I suffered in those days. And then we left the hay, the rucks, and then got the press to come with the engine, into the field, and the rucks were pulled up to the press and baled and then we had to put them on the carts and bring them home.

DC You didn't suffer from hay fever, or did you?

Mrs B No, never, never.

DC You had enough of it to cure you for ever.

Mrs B Well, I can never remember having any trouble in the countryside, never.

DC What time did you get off then?

Mrs B Well, round about the normal time, in the winter time, finishing on the yard, it was about quarter past six when we had tea, our main tea. In the morning we'd have breakfast about quarter past eight, that was all through the year. There would be what we'd call a lunch at about quarter past ten, which was bread and butter and jam and tea. And if we were working out in the fields the girl that helped in the house would bring them out in a basket with a big can full of tea, made up, and then we'd have our dinner, never called it lunch, our dinner at about quarter past twelve, I think. And then again, the trains were running in those days and if we were out in the fields and the wind was in the right

direction I would hear the quarter past four train blowing, going to Ballaugh, and it was time for me to go in and start the work on the yard. So there were quite a number of things, because in those days I couldn't wear a watch. I'm one of those people that can't wear a watch, so it was no use my having one. But we'd spend a lot ...

DC Did you get some weekends off then?

Mrs B Oh, yes, it was supposed to be every other weekend, sometimes I didn't go home – it was once every month. I used to travel on the bus or the tram, it would have to be the bus from Ballaugh, on what they called the Ballamoar Straight, on which *Ballamona* was situated, and the bus conductors and drivers, they were wonderful, because they knew, I don't know how they did, most of them were countrymen and they would know when my time was up for catching the bus home or going into Ramsey on a Saturday, and they would wait for me.

DC Really?

Mrs B Yes, they would wait at the gate, they would go over to the Cronk and turn and come back and often enough I was late, but they would, I don't know what the other people on the bus thought, but they were very kind down there, I mean they just sort of gathered you in and they would help whenever they could.

DC So your favourite job on the farm then, I gather from what you've said so far, anyway, would be milking, would it?

Mrs B Well, that was just one of them. There were other jobs that weren't quite so nice. If you'd been out and gathered the kale, got a load of kale, marris kale, and the weather was wet, you would take the wet kale in, tip it in the turnip shed, and feed it for the next morning or two and you were guaranteed to be saturated ...

DC Oh, yes.

Mrs B ... feeding the kale the next morning. And that was a bit of a messy job.

DC Would you be out in the fields on a wet day just the same?

Mrs B Oh, yes, just the same, and windy, wet and windy.

DC And you had four, did you have four winters there or three?

Mrs B '41, four it would be, wouldn't it?

DC What were the winters like, tough?

Mrs B Not too bad, the summers of course you always get better weather down the north of the Island and I don't think we had the wind down there that we have around here, because we get it straight from the south east, east, north east.

DC Down here at *Ballakilmartin*?

Mrs B Yes, and that is the worst wind for us. But down at Ballaugh it was mostly south-west in those days, I'm sure it was, I'm sure the pattern has changed.

DC You'd have had to pay quite a lot of your own money then for your clothing, and so on, as you say, did you get uniforms eventually?

Mrs B Yes, we did, in 1942. I think the Manx Government must have been in touch with the English Government because we got the same type of uniform as the Land Girls in England and elsewhere.

DC What did it come with, boots as well, did it?

Mrs B Yes, we had, everything we got was beautiful, the boots were brown leather, they were beautiful boots, wellies, of course, and then woolly socks, riding breeches. I'm not saying very much about the riding breeches, because they were baggy, they're sort of, they're not like the close fitting ones nowadays. And hats, we had aertex shirts, beige aertex shirts, that was for working in, and beautiful v-necked green pullovers, those really were very high standard.

DC Did you get wet weather cover as well, capes or anything like that?

Mrs B No, no. There was what we would call a car coat now, which was our coat over – well I kept most of my own things, you know, for number ones, as they call it in the Navy, and worked on what I already had and, but I was pretty lucky, I was

quite an even shape in those days and what I got was quite well fitted and our boots and wellies and things like that. Miss Teare, the supervisor, used to come about once a year, I think, if I remember rightly, and she would bring our uniforms and replacements. In the summer time we had khaki dungarees.

DC Well, while you were doing all this, of course, and in the early part of this period, Mr Howie was desperately trying to get people into the Women's Land Army, and the numbers were never achieved anything like what they wanted, were they?

Mrs B Oh, no, people just didn't, the girls just didn't want to join, it was easier, if they were over eighteen – of course it was easier to join one of the services, like the Navy, the Naval School over here, or the Air Force, whatever.

DC Later on they were compelled to join then, some girls, weren't they?

Mrs B Yes, they did have the power to direct them, they called it, to direct them into the Land Army, and there were, of course, some girls who refused to go, and there were court cases over it and they ...

DC They were fined in fact, weren't they?

Mrs B They would have been fined pretty heavily for those days. One girl would have been fined £5 a day, which was a colossal sum in those days, if she didn't report to *Knockaloe*. Luckily in the papers it did say that they turned up at *Knockaloe*, except one girl who was working in a canteen, a services canteen, and I suppose she was excused.

DC To get away from all this hard work then, did you have any sort of light relief, did you get to any dances, did you go to the pictures, anything like that?

Mrs B Oh, when we came to Ballaugh, joined the Girls Friendly Society, and all through the war time I think most of the districts put on dances if they could, or ran some form of concerts and things to get money to send parcels to the prisoners of war or to the Red Cross, anything like that. At Ballaugh they put on quite a lot of things and we put on plays and when I was at Peel, when I was at *Knockaloe*, I used to go to the pictures because that was just about all that we could do.

DC That would be a treat, would it?

Mrs B Oh, that was a treat, yes. It was only a little cinema and came out – oh, first of all, one night, it must have been in September or October of '41, a notice came on the screen, 'Would all military men report back to camp immediately.' We didn't know what was on, but when I got out of the cinema I realised that there was something radically wrong. I found out afterwards that the internees had rioted and the noise was dreadful, you wouldn't have thought it was a human noise at all, it was a terrible noise. I can't really describe it because there was such a volume of it and in those days of course there was no traffic, so of course you would hear it much more. And I was glad to get out of Peel and back to my digs at Patrick that night.

DC Nobody would hear about this, I mean it wouldn't be reported, would it?

Mrs B No, but actually I was talking once about this and Mrs Betty Hanson said, 'Now I remember very well the night that Laura's talking about, I was out with my father and mother and we came back and it was a horrifying noise,' and she said there were ordinary soldiers guarding these men at that time and the Government decided, I suppose it was the powers-that-be across, decided that they would get the Metropolitan Police over from London and there were a terrific number sent to Peel to guard these men. They were, when I was at Pete Kelly's, they were there picking potatoes and we'd been warned off not to – well, I was on my own actually, because I was there on my own anyway at *Knockaloe* – and we were warned not to look or take any notice of them, and they were so bedraggled looking and so sad. I suppose a lot of them were sad that they were in a situation like that, but there were also Moseley's men there, and I think that's what must have happened, they'd started this riot. Anyway they got the Metropolitan Police over to guard them.

DC Well, that's an interesting memory indeed, from that time. And these men, and that's another whole aspect of farming at the time, these men were actually out on farms, weren't they, doing the work that you Land Girls would be doing as well.

Mrs B Yes, they were picking potatoes – those were the only ones that I saw because when I went down to Ballaugh we didn't have any workers from any of the camps. I think it would have been too awkward to try and get them because they

would have had to come out on the train to Ballaugh and then have to be picked up, because it was about two miles from the station.

DC I keep returning to this idea that there must have been a lot of girls in the Island who could have been doing this work and didn't do it, and as we said it became compulsory after a while, but didn't they hold a big parade to try to drum up interest in the Land Girls?

Mrs B Yes, but it wasn't a success. Unfortunately they timed it on a Saturday afternoon, thinking that people would be in town, but the trouble being that it was a wet afternoon and the band which was supposed to precede us, from the bus station, the old bus station, over to *The Villa Marina*, refused to come out in case it ruined their instruments. So therefore we had to march on our own ...

DC In silence.

Mrs B ... yes, and then most of the shoppers were going home at that time.

DC Yes, because it was sort of 6 o'clock at night, or something.

Mrs B I think it was about half past four, quarter past five, and of course the shop people, of course, anybody working in town, would want to get home, so they weren't going to go and watch.

DC So there wouldn't be many spectators at all?

Mrs B No, I know my mother came to see me getting my long service armband, and instead of having the presentation in the gardens of *The Villa Marina*, we had to have it in the main hall, and we got our pat on the back from the Governor, who was ...

DC Lord Granville, was it?

Mrs B Lord Granville and Lady Rose was there as well, and he did give the hint then that the powers-that-be would have a heavier hand with some of the girls who were not responding and they would be drafted into the Land Army. It was said that day and of course we didn't know whether they were doing it, or not, it was only when I read the papers later on, years later on, that I found out that they

had been having trouble. But having said it about the girls who refused to work, some of the other Land Girls said we took our hats off to those girls, they didn't want to do the work, they were honest about it, but they did their best, and they worked hard.

DC Yes, you researched this as much as you could, many, many years after, of course, and statistics and figures have been difficult to come by, have they?

Mrs B Yes, the records seem to have been destroyed. The only ones ... I mean there were quite a lot of girls out on the farms that hadn't been through *Knockaloe*, so their names weren't on the payroll, but they had the uniform just the same as we did and it says ...

DC You've got some figures for 1945.

Mrs B ... yes, in the records it said that the year ending 31st March 1945, 98 was the number of the total enrolment since the beginning of the Land Army on the 24th June 1941. 35 of those enrolments were cancelled, the mobile squad numbers were 25, those were the mobile girls who were stationed either at Peel or at Lezayre Lodge, and there were 36 girls placed permanently on farms. And there were trainees in March 1945, there were two trainees at *Knockaloe*.

DC So that was only 63 altogether, in fact.

Mrs B That was 63 altogether, but there must have been others around the farms who were actually in the Land Army and didn't go through *Knockaloe*. These figures were taken from the figures of the payroll at *Knockaloe*.

DC Wasn't there also some sort of enquiry, if someone wanted to join the Land Army, some girls were found to be unsuitable, weren't they?

Mrs B Well, I think that when they had the power to, well, shall I say ...

DC Conscript them really?

Mrs B ... yes, to conscript them, if they wanted to object they could go before a Board of Enquiry. I think there were two of those and some of them were actually forced to go to *Knockaloe* and train. I think others would ...

- DC** They would have reasons not to go.
- Mrs B** ... they would have reasons not to go, and I think there would be some that would just throw in the towel and go, because it was the easier thing to do, rather than have the hassle of almost a court case.
- DC** And of course at this time then, they're getting nearer towards the end of the war anyway, when it came to the end of the war were you just cast aside and said thanks very much, off you go?
- Mrs B** No, actually, I had to go into hospital because I had a very bad hernia, no doubt with lifting too many heavy things or doing too heavy work, but Mr Howie, himself, in his reports to the Board of Agriculture, said it was rather a mistake to break up the Women's Land Army so early because the men were not coming back from the services and going back onto the farms, and we still needed all the food that we could produce. I know that the Air Force at Jurby was being cut down, the Naval Services, of course, would be getting cut down, but even so there was still an awful lot of food that needed to be provided and quite honestly, particularly down the north of the Island, where the crops are usually heavier. I suppose somebody will object to that, but they usually are ...
- DC** Well, it's good soil, isn't it?
- Mrs B** ... yes, and particularly down there they did miss the helpers, either the mobile squads or the girls who were down there.
- DC** Did you get gratuities or anything like that?
- Mrs B** Nothing. Yes, I'm sorry, we got ten extra clothing coupons and that was what we finished with. We had to hand back all our uniforms, what they wanted those for, I mean that was ridiculous, and no, when you finished you just – you didn't even get a thank you. I know the girls across got a sort of notice with the Queen Mother, Queen Elizabeth, signing it because she was a patron of the English, of the main Women's Land Army and that was something to keep. We didn't even get a paper.
- DC** If, looking back at it now, and you had a big reunion in 1979 I think, didn't you, and looking at that and what you thought in those days and looking back at it

now, was it really a tough time for most girls?

Mrs B It was. I mean to start off and do work, working in the fields for long hours, heavy work, mind you it was – you were out in the open air. In the summer time you got the best of the weather, in the winter time you got the worst of it, and I don't think I'd have done anything else really, I wouldn't have done.

DC If you had to do it again, would you look forward to it or not?

Mrs B Well, I've been doing it for the last 50 years.

DC It was training for you, wasn't it?

Mrs B Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW