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Cinderellas in Breeches



Detail of Women's Land Army breeches WW2

During its eleven year existence (1939-1950) 200,000 women joined the Women's Land Army (WLA). The image of the land girl standing tall in her corduroy breeches, green jumper and brown felt hat, fork resting over her shoulder, has become an icon of the triumph of wartime agriculture. The breeched uniform formed part of their daily lives, shaped their identities and influenced perceptions of them.

During both world wars women's land armies were established to ensure the production of essential food – and timber – when male workers were redeployed into the armed forces. This mobile force of women undertook hard physical work for long hours and in all weathers for low rates of pay to ensure the island nation was fed.

Each newly recruited land girl was provided with two pairs of breeches as part of her uniform and over 400,000 pairs of breeches were manufactured in Britain to clothe them. Most recruits were drawn from the towns and cities and many, just 17 years old, were billeted on isolated farms far away from home and friends. Denied the prestige offered to women in the auxiliary services, the land girls were nicknamed the 'Green Cinderellas' and 'Cinderellas of the Soil'.

During the first world war, a Women's Land Army (WLA) was not formed until 1917 when food shortages had reached crisis point. During the two years of this first incarnation high standards were demanded. The Land Army handbook cautioned, 'You are doing a man's work and so you are dressed rather like a man; but remember that just because you wear a smock and

breeches you should take care to behave like an English girl who expects chivalry and respect from everyone she meets. Noisy or ugly behaviour brings discredit, not only upon yourself, but upon the uniform...'

In 1939, Britain was importing 60% of its foodstuffs and – drawing on lessons learned in the previous war – a WLA was in place by the outset of war. Lady Denman, DBE, was appointed Honorary Director of the WLA for England and Wales – Scotland and Northern Ireland had separate agricultural departments. The uniform was similar in both wars as despite considerable socio-cultural shifts it retained its utility and modernity.

Whilst the land girls were travelling around the country and working on the land, the raw material for the breeches they wore had been grown and picked overseas (in some instances by American land girls). Cotton was crucial, not only for civilian clothing and uniform but also for making tyre cases, belting, webbing and other equipment for the services. During the late 1930s, with war on the horizon, the Government accumulated raw materials, including uniform cloths.

The cotton was shipped to UK ports; transported by train to factories where it was spun, dyed and woven. WLA breeches were usually made from cotton corduroy (the word derives from a road made of logs laid cross-wise), a durable cut-pile fabric, with woven, raised, parallel ribs which, in theory, helped water to run off the



fabric – although land girls recall not being able to dry them overnight and getting chilblains on their knees.

Hebden Bridge in Yorkshire was the centre for corduroy manufacture until the 1960s. The woven cloth was then taken to manufacturers, many of which were located in Manchester and Leeds, to be made up. Land Girl breeches were made from four main and ten small pattern pieces which included four belt loops, khaki cotton drill for the pockets; dark brown cotton, khaki-coloured cotton tape and bias binding. There were six brown composition buttons, 20 brass eyelets and two green laces. Five different coloured threads were used to sew the various components: sage green, khaki, oyster, dark brown and petrol blue. Once finished breeches were sent to WLA headquarters at Balcombe Place, Sussex. There, they were sorted, stored and either transported to a uniform centre, or posted to the recruit as new or replacement uniform.

Labels on surviving breeches identify them as WLA and specify size, manufacturer and date. The quality varies, but most were made to a high specification. Each land girl was issued with two pairs – to be worn until they had no wear left. Replacements were permitted after 12 months, but shortages meant this was not always possible. Cotton drill dungarees were worn for the dirtiest, which included rat-catching, muck-spreading and ditching.

The breeches were not only worn for work: many land girls wore them during their leisure, even to local dances held when servicemen were stationed nearby. However in some rural communities and amongst older generations breeches were considered unacceptable in non-working contexts. Inherently masculine, they were associated with subversively independent women and lesbians such as the writer and gardener Vita Sackville West who had her breeches tailor-made.



Land Girls World War 2 in their formal uniform comprising hat, shirt, tie, sweater, breeches, wool stocking and sturdy leather shoes. For everyday work, they often wore dungarees with overall coats and rubber boots.

When a land girl left the service she was required to return her uniform to her County Officer, who sent it to a local, or one of the two national depots. Returned breeches that were barely worn were reissued to new recruits as part of their original outfit. Worn breeches were cleaned and were sometimes offered for sale to land girls who could afford, and wanted, another pair.



In both world wars women were employed to sift through piles of returned and de-loused uniform to identify items that could be cleaned, repaired and reissued. In World War I garments unfit for future wear were either turned into rag or pulped to make fertiliser. It is satisfying to consider that the life of the land girl's breeches, like the seasons and growth of crops, might have also been cyclical: that they were ultimately of and returned to the soil.



After the war vast quantities of surplus uniform,

including WLA items, were sent to Europe to support various relief operations. Huge quantities were never distributed and have languished in warehouses for over 50 years. Over the passage of time the value and meaning of garments alters. Today, items of WLA uniform have become desirable garments.

WLA breeches are sold by both militaria and vintage clothing dealers. One feeds into the vogue for mixing new and historical clothes, especially items that have links with catwalk trends – Balenciaga's A/W 2007-08 collection featured breeches. The other serves the popular demand for authentic clothes for wartime re-enactment and themed events. Although replica garments are available, participants will pay significant sums in order to dress in the 'real thing'. Both trends form part of a broader culture of nostalgia that has had significant impact on the culture and heritage sector.

From 1939 to 1950, the land girls travelled across Britain to work on the land. Some of the cotton corduroy breeches they wore continue to do so, in material form, and as memories across time and space. ●●● Amy de la Hay

The Land Girls: Cinderellas of the Soil, Brighton Museum, 1 October 2009-14 March 2010 T: +44 (0)1273 292882, www.brighton.virtualmuseum.info, Accompanying book, ISBN: to follow,



Detail of cotton corduroy breeches. A white cotton label with printed black ink specified that the breeches were made for the WLA, named the manufacturer, the date of manufacture and size – they were made in 11 graded sizes.

((Caption 2) A Land Girl c1917-1919.
Caption 3)

(Caption 4)
Illustration of uniform from the Land Army Manual,
World War 2
(Caption 4)

Detail of cotton corduroy breeches
(Caption 5)

The breeches were made from cotton corduroy (four main, and ten small pattern pieces which included four belt loops), khaki cotton drill for the pockets; dark brown cotton, khaki-coloured cotton tape and bias binding. There were six brown composition buttons, 20 brass eyelets and two green laces. Five different coloured threads were used to sew the various components: sage green, khaki, oyster, dark brown and petrol blue.
(Caption 6)

(Caption 7)
Land girls at Brighton Museum & Art Gallery (left to right) Diane Fisher, Doris Bradley, Alice Racher, Beryl Gould and Nancy Johnson, June 2009