



the story of wooler hostel

the Audrey Forrester ROOM



"I joined the Women's Land Army in July 1942 After working six weeks at Cornhill on Tweed, I volunteered for work on Pest Destruction. Six of us moved into railway carriages at Burnhouse Farm, in Wooler; we had bunk beds, a coal stove and a paraffin lamp. We were a very happy crowd and I was the youngest at 17½ years old. Our supervisor, Winnie Ford, lived in a caravan.

Our main job was gassing rabbits and poisoning rats, and at harvest-time as all-round hands, cutting thistles, picking stones, hoeing turnips and picking potatoes.

Our first big kill of rats was out at Johnnie Barr's place at Pressen where there were fifty hen houses. The rats were so plentiful that they were tame. We fed them with flour and sugar on Mondays and Wednesdays, but Warfarin on Fridays.



On the following Monday, we picked up thousands of dead rats! But rats are very cunning and they got used to our poison, so then we had to use zinc phosphate. This made the rats bloat as they cannot be sick. I enjoyed the work very much.

We had a ladder (which we called Emma) which we used to climb up into the feed loft in the granary, to put poison on the wall heads. Rats can have a litter of young every twenty-one days so you can imagine how quickly they increased. Once we got on top of the infestation of rats, we visited the farms every three months.

Later on, our vans were moved to a field behind the Tankerville Arms Hotel. (In those days it was called 'The Cottage Hotel'.) I always remember the lovely glass conservatory at the front. The Ryecroft Hotel was an Army Headquarters. The NAAFI was the house that later became the dental surgery and chiropodist.

We got on very well with the people of Wooler. They invited us to have baths in their homes! We only visited the W.L.A. hostel to see if there were any special bus passes, as the normal bus fare to Newcastle was 6/4d return. So if you could afford it, a week-end home was from Saturday lunch time to Sunday night. Those were the days! On a Friday night we always went to Foxy's Rendezvous Cafe on the Peth, where we got a good helping of egg and chips, bread and butter and tea for 2/6 (half a crown). There were always dances in Archbold Hall. I never ever went into a pub or smoked. I never had any spare money as I always gave something to my mum. If you wanted a good seat at the Drill Hall picture house you booked your seat at Brands. I went to the Methodist Church in Cheviot Street, Mrs Mortimer played the organ and the singing was always good when the Welsh soldiers were in Wooler.

My worst experience was when I was told that I had to work in the dairy at Cottage Farm, as the dairyman was on two weeks holiday. Johnny Wilson said to me, "You stand at the gate and shout 'Up! Up!' and the cows will all come." It worked fine until one day, I was putting them back into the field and they got into Canon Fairhirst's Vicarage garden. They ate all the cabbages and trampled the flowers.

I was frightened and helpless and Canon Fairhirst said I was a stupid young girl. But worse was to follow. Next day when I got all the cows tied up, I found I had a cow too many. Johnny Wilson the farmer was mad because I had brought the bull in from the field with the cows, and I had tied him up too. He said "You're lucky!" I never lived it down in Wooler as

'The Land Girl who tried to milk the bull.' I got a red face every time I went into Brands, Bill Bleuit, Alice Brand and Betty always mentioned it.

I liked Wooler when it had the fountain at the Market Place. Bryson the baker baked the best bread and pies that I have ever tasted. Days, the fruit shop was next door and then there was Mrs Martin's sweet shop. But all the character has gone out of Wooler because the shops now sell everything from an onion to a TV and I feel it's everyone to his trade. I moved to Milfield in 1947 and in 2007 back to Wooler, but never went back to Newcastle.

The happiest days of my life have been spent in this area, but there have been sad ones too."

Below: Winnie Ford (née Weightman), left, and Audrey Forrester (née Marr).

