



the story of wooler hostel

the Muriel Whillis ROOM



Miss Muriel Whillis
(née Dunbavin) left her home in Wallsend, Newcastle to join the Women's Land Army on 18th August 1943. She worked in the organisation for four years until 14th May 1948. Upon leaving she married Tommy Whillis, whom she had met whilst working on a farm.

Her recruitment letter is worded: "It has been arranged for you to start work at the farms in the district of Fenton, Northumberland, for the War Agricultural Committee on 7th September 1943 arriving on 6th September.

Living accommodation will be provided for you at the Y.W.C.A. W.L.A. Hostel, Fenton House, Wooler." Muriel lived at Fenton Hostel for three years, after which she moved to Wooler Hostel. Fenton House was then owned by Lord and Lady Durham who leased it for use during the war until purpose built accommodation was constructed. Muriel remembers about 35 to 40 girls living at Fenton. The forewoman at Fenton was Jean Ford, an eccentric character who eventually retired to the Isle of Skye.

Food at the hostel was good, extra vegetables being grown in Fenton garden. Lunchtime sandwiches were made the night before and covered with a damp cloth overnight. However, the physical work created such an appetite they were "always hungry". If the baker's van appeared delivering goods to Fenton House, they would sometimes be able to buy an extra bun or a pie. When going home at weekends they would sometimes be able to take a rabbit caught locally on the estate.

They went out to work on different farms in the area including Fowberry. The girls used bicycles or were transported by van. The work included, "everything you can think of!" Muriel was not involved in milking cows or driving a tractor but recalls cutting 'baigies' (turnips), cleaning out hemmels and spreading muck, helping with the dipping of sheep, haymaking and harvesting.

Below, from top left, clockwise:
Monica Lowrey, Agnes Perret,
unknown, Muriel Whillis,
Ethel Pantry, unknown.



She recalled the German and Italian prisoners of war, from the P.O.W. camp, on the site of the current Wooler Middle School, working on the farms whilst well guarded. They were generally a congenial lot, only too happy to be out of the fighting. One particular German had spent time in Russia and suffered terrible chilblains on his feet. The parents of her husband-to-be took pity on this individual and allowed him to bathe his feet in the warmth of their home. He was an ex-postman and could speak broken English. Later, 'displaced persons' from Latvia and Lithuania worked on the farms.

She experienced the hard winter of 1947 when much of the country became snowbound. Photographs reveal her involved in digging snow from the hostel in Wooler.

Muriel remembers happy times with "plenty, plenty of laughs!"

Below:
Muriel, 2005.

