

the story of wooler hostel

the Ruby Fairbairn ROOM



RUBY FAIRBAIRN (née Burns) came from Newcastle, joining the Womens Land Army after the war. She was 'contracted' to help with silage-making. The silage was made in a large pit. The long grass was cut with a tractor and then layered with peas (the whole of the plant) before being compacted by trampling. Molasses was added to provide extra nutrients. This work took her to many farms in the area, including Chillingham Castle Home Farm where silage was made as a winter supplement for the Chillingham Wild White Cattle. She was not allowed near them but was able to view the herd over a fence.

Work continued in seasonal rotation. Hay was turned by a hand-rake, formed into small heaps and then into larger 'pikes' that were stacked. At corn-harvesting she followed the binder which cut the standing corn and dropped the bound sheaves to be propped up – 8 sheaves to a 'stook'. When dry they were



'led' to the farmyard for storage in a larger 'rick'. If a lull occurred, odd jobs such as cutting thistles had to be done. Two types of implements were used for the two species of thistle, a hoe and a special small, long-handed scythe or 'G-bar'. Harvesting and 'shawing' (removing the greenery and root stump) was back-breaking work.



Ruby's memories of Wooler hostel include there being one large, long dormitory with rows of bunk beds either side; each pair of bunks being divided by a pair of wardrobes. The room was heated with two large stoves, one at each end.



Two late passes *per* week could be claimed, allowing the girls out until 11.00pm, otherwise the warden checked every bed to ensure it was occupied at 10.00pm. Boys were allowed in to play cards or dominoes or to await the girls if going out.

Ruby recalls the brilliant camaraderie and two girls who were naturally skilled pianists. Otherwise entertainment included visits to



Wooler cinema and dances at the Milfield camp. The German prisoners of war in Wooler had an impressive band, likewise the displaced persons, from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.



German Prisoners of War

The hostel closed before the Women's Land Army was disbanded, so the dwindling numbers of occupants were transferred to other local hostels. Ruby and Margaret Shanks were two of the last occupants and were transferred to Norham hostel. Each hostel, at that time had a representative who attended a monthly meeting at Felton where any grievances might be aired. Ruby fulfilled this role whilst at Norham. The majority of girls, probably 90%, married local men. At the end of her time with the Women's Land Army Ruby worked at one farm only – Barmoor Southmoor – where she met her husband, whom she married in Wooler, after a brief time at home in Newcastle.

