

Britain's Lumberjills: The Forgotten Women of the Women's Timber Corps (WTC)

The Women's Timber Corps (WTC) was a little-known subdivision of the Women's Land Army (WLA). Formed officially in April 1942, and composed entirely of women, the Corps was organised to make up for the drift of male forestry workers into the Armed Forces and to assist with the drive to reduce Britain's unsustainable reliance on imported timber.



Between 1940 and 1945 the WTC employed a small, elite cohort of just over 6,000 women doing work that previously had only ever been done by men. The Lumberjills worked in nomadic gangs across the length and breadth of England, Wales and Scotland, surveying, clearing, and processing Britain's standing timber into essential wartime supplies including the timber for the chestnut 'railings' or tracks that were used during the D-Day landings, the telegraph poles for communications and the charcoal for the smokescreen that helped the allies to cross the Rhine in 1945 as well as ship's masts and beech for the frames of Mosquito aircraft. They also kept the British mining industry going by producing pitprops.

The women of the WTC needed a higher academic standard than the women of the WLA and they had to sit a maths exam to decide which women should be trained as measurers, the most highly skilled role which involved measuring the cubic quantity of wood in a single tree and the volume of wood in an area of forest. Generally, they were not recruited on the basis of their stature or physical strength, but rather enthusiasm, resilience and good humour were thought more important. All recruits went to camps for a month's training in timber and its production. They learnt how to identify trees and measure woodland, how to select trees for telegraph poles and how to fell, haul and process standing timber. Each woman was then sent into the area of production in which they had shown the most aptitude. They worked for the Forestry Commission or the timber trade and to avoid the risk of them returning home if they were home-sick or didn't like the work, they were sent far away from home, including to Holsworthy in Devon. For many city women the promise of safety and fresh air made the WTC an attractive wartime occupation. Country women were not allowed to join either the WLA or the WTC as it was seen as a way of protecting young women from towns and cities from the bombing.



Women of the WTC and male foresters in the Woods of Thornbury cutting pit-props.

Leaving training camp was when real life as a lumberjill would begin, when the women would have to fend for themselves out in the forest doing arduous work in all weathers and facing rough treatment from the tough timber merchants and male forestry workers who often resented them. This policy and the remote locations of forests often meant the women were billeted in small cottages in remote villages miles away from family and friends and even the nearest cinema or entertainment so they could often feel quite isolated and alone. As they moved so often the women constantly had to find billets and so received the most basic food at a time of rationing; often the

portion sizes were not enough to feed these hard-working women as there was an underlying assumption that women needed less food than the men which meant they often went hungry. Hazel Collins who worked in Thornbury woods explained how the transient work and life meant she had to mature, overcome fears and meet many new challenges. Being alone, working away from home change her attitude making her a stronger more self-reliant person which stayed with her for life.



Hazel Collins measuring timber in Thornbury

Great skill, precision and physical strength were required for felling. The women worked with axes weigh in between 4 ½ and 14 lbs. Becoming more accurate and proficient with the axe took time and practise as the axe is not something you want to be swinging around if you are losing focus or energy as that's when mistakes happen. It was hard for the women to begin with, as it would have been for the men, but they built up skill and stamina quite quickly. The trees felled by the women varied from the young pine trees destined to become pit props to the 100 year old great oaks felled for railway sleepers or shipbuilding. 'Brashing' was the name given to removing branches from standing trees by taking off the lower branches and leaving the upper branches intact. 'Snedding' refers to the branches being removed from a felled tree. In both cases the branches are removed from the trunk with a billhook, axe or bow saw.

Little could prepare the women for the brutal working conditions in the forest in winter with pouring rain or snow, icy wind and frozen, rutted mud. They worked 6 days a week from 7:30 till 5:00 p.m. and some days were longer. They even worked in the dark and the pouring rain and when it snowed, they carried on working out in the forest with nowhere to eat their sandwiches but instead they had to stand deep in snow and keep moving to stay warm.

First-hand reports of women such as Hazel Collins who worked felling timber in Thornbury Manor's wood to supply Thornbury Mill mention the discomfort of the clothing, especially the boots and the 'passion killing' underwear but at least it kept them warm in what must have been a dreadfully cold job.



Hazel Collins and other girls in their cut-off dungarees



The 'passion-killing' underwear that kept them warm!

Many women worked in sawmills but handling heavy timber required considerable strength to lever the logs into position on the saw bench so the women often worked with the men. Provided they were not put onto jobs which were too heavy for them it was said they could maintain a good level of output. They learned to use the different types of saw and some taught themselves to become saw doctors. But the reality of sawmilling was that it was one of the most dangerous jobs. Accidents were routine and included amputation of fingers, bronchitis from dust inhalation, and even broken legs, arms and other bones as a result of toppling timber or accidents with horses hauling the timber onto machines.

In 1942, 3000 Italians were integrated into the timber production and by 1945, 45,000 Germans were employed in agriculture and forestry despite the complaints logged by local parish councils and members of the public over the freedom granted to these men. However, it was seen as preferable to keeping them in camps doing nothing. Their presence was not always welcomed by the Lumberjills as they were often not allowed to speak to or mixed with them and the POWs received better treatment than they did. They didn't have to work in the rain or walk or cycle to and from the forest, they had larger rations, they complained more and received a more consistent supply of vital equipment including Wellington boots.

In Holsworthy, Hazel Collins and her friends swapped lunches and flirted with the Italian POWs as they found them very interesting, but they also were not allowed to have much to do with them or learn their names. She says one was a violin maker and more than 60 years later when in her late 80s and on holiday in Italy she was sitting with friends in a restaurant and saw little matchstick violins all round the walls. The proprietor came through and she said she met an Italian once who made her a violin like that. He asked where and when told it was Holsworthy in Devon, he confirmed it was him. They were both old by then, but Hazel was moved to tears. He had just been a POW based at the end of the road on the Italian POW camp, but the memory of the violin stayed with her and reminded her of him.

By the end of the war the number of workers in forestry had risen from 14,000 to 73,000 at its peak. With as many as 15,000 being women they probably accounted for one in five forestry workers. During the Second World War more wood was produced from British Woodlands than ever before in history.

After the war, even though there were members of the WTC who sadly lost their lives in war service, as they were not part of the fighting forces, for 50 years after the war the women of both the WTC and the WLA were not allowed to take part in Remembrance Day parades. In October 2007 more than 60 years later, the WTC received their first formal recognition when the Forestry Commission unveiled a memorial in Aberfoyle, Scotland. It is a permanent memorial statue of a life size bronze sculpture of a Lumberjill dedicated to the members of the WTC. In December 2007 the government announced that the women's land army and timber corps would receive formal recognition for the first time with the issue of a special badge of honour. In 2014 a monument to both the women of the WLA and WTC was unveiled at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire.



Memorial to the women of the WTC and WLA at the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire



Memorial to the women of the WTC in Queen Elizabeth Forest Park near Aberfoyle

With thanks to Holsworthy Museum for some of the photographs and the book 'Lumberjills, Britain's forgotten army', by Joanna Foat, 2019 for the women's stories.

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