

*Isabella Gray
(Dornoch)*

My mother, Isabella Gray, (always known as Isabel) was born in Edinburgh on 19th June 1927. She left school at the age of fourteen and went to work in Wilkies on Princess Street in Edinburgh where she was trained to be a dress seller. My mother often laughs when she remembers those



*Flower Thomson Presenting Isabel
with her Land Army Medal
and Certificate*

days because apparently, though the ‘youngsters’ were let loose on the customers, if the senior assistants suspected that a sale was about to be made they would step in quickly and complete the sale because they would get the commission!

One of my mother’s other duties - even at that very young age - was to do fire duty at night. She and Miss Wilkie, one of the members of the family who owned the shop at that time, had to go up on the roof of the shop, armed only with a stirrup pump and as my mother says, if the shop actually had been hit by a bomb not only would she and Miss Wilkie been blown to bits, the stirrup pump would not have been much use. Did my mother get the day off after being on the roof all night, guarding the shop? Of course not. She still had to put in a full day’s work on the shop floor and her wages for the week- Monday to Saturday - were five shillings, or twenty-five pence in today’s money.

In 1943, my mother decided she wanted to do more for the war effort. Her dream was to join the Wrens, but her father was a chief petty officer in the Navy and he said ‘No daughter of mine is going to go in the Navy!’ So that put an end to that. My mother’s cousin decided she was going to join the Land Army and she showed my mother all these posters of girls leaning on haystacks, under blue sunny skies and my mother thought, that looks fun. Both my grandmother and great grandmother, attempted to dissuade my mother from joining up, saying she wouldn’t like the country after being a city girl all her life, but having been thwarted in her desire to join the Wrens, my mother was not going to be stopped this time, and, as she pointed out, she wouldn’t be alone, she would be with her cousin.

She and her cousin promptly signed up and were sent to East Lothian to do their training, almost immediately my mother's cousin was sent off to one farm while my mother was sent to one in Aberdeenshire so she was alone after all.

I think farming life was a real shock for my city girl mother. She found the accent of the people in Aberdeenshire very hard to understand and the few male workers on the farm thought it great fun to put mice in the Land Girls' boots and sandwich boxes. Getting up when it was dark - going to bed when it was dark, was difficult, too and my mother suffered from the most appalling chilblains in the Winter. Chilblains which went from the back of her ankles right up to the back of her knees, which meant she was in great pain a lot of the time. Eventually the farm owner took pity on her and allowed my mother to work in the greenhouses during the Winter months, but in the Summer it was all hands on deck and my mother's most abiding memory is of standing on top of the hay wagon, forking hay into the thresher and praying she wouldn't fall in there too.

My mother did make a very good friend on the farm, a girl called Jenny Taylor. Jenny told my mother that her cousin Jim, was in Malaya in the Air Force, but he didn't have many people writing to him, so she wondered if my mother would like to write to be his pen pal. My mother duly wrote a letter and got a real stinker of a letter back from Jim saying he didn't need any complete strangers writing to him, thank you very much and he certainly didn't need anyone feeling sorry for him. My mother wrote back to him - an equally snippy letter - saying fine, if that was the way he felt, then she wouldn't write any more. Jim wrote back to say he was very sorry and he shouldn't have been so rude. Who was Jim? Jim was my father. He and my mother wrote to each other for the rest of the war, my father telling my mother all about life in India and Malaya and my mother told him about her life on the farm. Of course, my father could never tell my mother what he was actually doing because of security, so his letters were full of descriptions of the people and customs he encountered. My grandmother and great grandmother used to read these letters as they said. 'It was like a proper travelogue!' When the war ended, my father met my mother for the very first time and he always said that the minute he saw her on Waverley Station he knew she was the girl for him. They were married for sixty-one very happy years, it's strange to think that if my mother had been allowed to join the Wrens she would never have met my father and my sister and I would never have been born.