

DIANA UNDERWOOD

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Diana was born in Deddington in 1923. Her parents were Alexander and Dorothy Fortescue. Her father was a solicitor with the firm Stockton, Sons and Fortescue. Diana had a younger brother, John, and the family lived in Church Street in the house then known as the Fortescue's House but now called the Old Malthouse. This is her story in her own words:

Diana age five on her front doorstep

'I volunteered for the Timber Corps of the Women's Land Army in January 1941 and received notice of the date and time to go by train to Monmouth station, taking a bicycle with me. Several other girls were on the same train and we were met with a lorry which took us and our bikes to Park End, the training school in the Forest Of Dean, near Lydney.

We were given our uniform, two fawn aertex type shirts, knee breeches, a green jersey, two pairs of fawn dungarees, a short overall coat, a pair of either leather ankle boots or leather shoes, two pairs of knee-length socks, a short light brown overcoat, a bright green beret (which I never wore) and a pair of gumboots. It was hostel type accommodation. We spent the first day indoors, learning about measuring timber and the importance of accuracy as the fellers' wages (they were paid piece work) and the amount paid by the Ministry of Supply for all the timber bought all over the country would depend on our figures.

Out in the woods, with notebooks, 100ft tape measures, and $\frac{1}{4}$ girth tapes, we learned the difference between hardwoods, oak and sweet chestnut, and softwoods, larch and pine. We were shown how to measure the felled and cleaned trees (butts) and number the base if the cutters had not already done so, using blue waxed chalk. We had to record the cordwood (branches cut into 4ft lengths and stacked) and the part cords. The brushwood was burned. Some softwoods yielded pit props of a length which we also had to record. We were later able to work out the cubic capacity of each numbered butt with the help of a small calculator book, a Hoppus.



The fortnight of training passed quickly and we were assigned to jobs in different parts of the country. A girl who heard where I was to go, asked me to change with her as my proposed destination was near her home. She was booked to go to the New Forest.

So, complete with bike, I was met at Southampton station by the local officer responsible for the girls and moving them wherever they were needed. She found us lodgings (digs) and was supposed always to check the digs before we moved. We were sometimes able to find our own digs, but it was never an easy job. Workmen were building an airfield for the Americans at Stoney Cross and they were able to pay more for digs so we were unable to get in anywhere for the recommended £1 a week and usually had to pay 25 shillings, sometimes 30 shillings.

We were given breakfast, an evening meal and a packed lunch. Although we had 12oz of cheese instead of the standard 4oz ration, the landladies had difficulty finding filling for our sandwiches. We had our share of beetroot and "pink paste"! Most foods were rationed and we had to make sure of taking our ration books when we moved digs. I must have stayed with 10 or 12 families, mainly in Lyndhurst, Ringwood and Brockenhurst. If we found good digs it was better to stay and cycle further as our jobs changed. My take home pay was £4 7s 2d a fortnight.

I started measuring round timber in Roe woods, near Ringwood, and then moved to other plantations as each was felled. The Ministry of Supply was responsible for the whole operation all over the country. It supplied all the labour and machinery to provide much-needed timber for all government requirements. It negotiated with the Forestry Commission and private estates for plantations which could be felled. Pine cones were collected and bagged up for seed and sent to a nursery somewhere near Ringwood in the New Forest.

Most of the felled round timber was hauled by Caterpillar D2 tractors from the woods to nearby sawmills or to the roadside to be collected by road-going timber carriages. All the machinery was repaired from the main workshop by Lyndhurst Road station. There was also a large sawmill there, the depot for the lorries, sawn timber, pit props, and cordwood were dispatched by train from the station. One haulier, a family called Kitcher from Brockenhurst, was the only one to use horses for hauling round timber from the woods.

When the bombing range between Fritham and Stoney Cross was to be used we were notified in advance to keep out between the hours specified. Sometimes practice parachute jumps took place along the open ridge. We seldom saw deer.

There were seven or eight sawmills in various parts of the forest. We worked in the attached "offices" which were small wooden huts, rather like present day garden-sheds. They contained a bench, shelves, two stools, a telephone and a wood burning Tortoise stove which toasted our sandwiches, dried wet coats and kept us warm in winter.

We kept records of the daily output of sawn timber, details of stock in hand and sizes required for which we received orders from the main office, Red Lodge in Lyndhurst. We passed on the sizes to the sawyer, he knew what he could produce from the round timber delivered and would tell the cross cutters the lengths he needed. They handled the logs on the skids with a peevy, a long-handled implement with a rounded iron hook on the end. Bigger butts might yield railway crossings - 6ins x 12ins x 12ft long or sleepers - 4ins x 8ins x 8ft 6ins long. The other

sawyers cut appropriate sizes from the rest of the log. We checked the sawn timber on to lorries and ensured we had enough round timber on the skids to keep going and enough fuel for the engine.

We calculated the wages for the mill men, who worked piece work as a team and kept a close eye on the daily output figures, on which their bonus depended. If one of the team was away, we sometimes helped with stacking sawn timber or crosscutting. I spent several days on one end of a cross-cut saw at various times.

There were also a number of portable “forest benches” consisting of one rack bench driven from the pulley of a stationary Fordson tractor. These cut four sides from the logs, thus making “squared logs”. We sold the off-cut bark to local men as slabwood, by the lorry load. They sold it on for various building jobs, or cut it up for firewood.

One day a lorry load of Italian Prisoners of War were delivered to the mill, without prior instructions or notice. These came from a nearby PoW camp and were used to do labouring jobs around the forest, They were not allowed to work with the charcoal burners as charcoal was used in the making of munitions. We set them to make up the roadway to the woods which was badly churned up by the crawler tractors. It would get stuck on a tree stump in the mud and have to be pulled off by another tractor. We showed the Italians the slabwood and a heap of sawdust, fortunately they had built this sort of road elsewhere and made a good job of it. They brought us each a bowl of coffee at lunchtime and told us they were in North Africa and hid from the Germans but ran towards the British with their arms up to surrender, they did not want to fight!

We always wondered why one of the tractor drivers looked so clean and tidy in spite of all the mud and why he was so polite. We found out later that he had been a butler before the war which was not a “reserved occupation”. He taught me to drive the Caterpillar tractor.

Most mills were driven by oil engines but the one at Lindford had a steam engine, the driver starting an hour earlier than the other men to get up steam. I spent half a day sawing up slabwood for the engine on a small saw bench when they were shorthanded. It was at Lindford that some kind ladies provided individual meat pies for all the workers there on Fridays. I fetched these from a house along the main road. Jolly good they were too!

The Sawyers used plate saws and inserted tooth saws; these were sharpened every morning before work started and the sawdust was dug out and added to the pile outside. On the whole they cut the sizes that were asked of them, but some had a habit of keeping “elbows” which had always been kept for boat building. Any large elm logs they would put to one side for coffin boards. We were told to discourage these practices!

Occasionally two of us were taken to a softwood plantation to mark straight trees for telegraph poles. However straight they appeared from all angles standing, when they were felled, rined and laid out on skids, they seemed to twist all ways. The GPO buyer always complained about them, they were not as good as the ones he used to get from Norway, but he had to take the best ones. His rejects went for Air Ministry or Admiralty poles.

Sometimes I spent a day with two men and a lorry collecting pit props of various sizes. These were loaded into railway goods wagons and I wrote the consignment notes to places in Wales with unpronounceable names.

My last job was on the Norman Court Estate, near Salisbury, measuring round timber sold to the Ministry of Supply. The agent, an elderly man, Mr Woolley came once a week to check the measurements of the timber felled on behalf of the estate. He agreed with my figures and I found him very pleasant. He told me the estate belonged to the Singer family (of sewing machine fame).

By this time I was married and expecting our first child, but I was sad to leave in autumn 1943. I kept in touch with the girl with whom I worked for a time. She went with some others to Germany after the war, presumably to work on timber for rebuilding. I enjoyed my time in the Timber Corps, we cycled many miles in all weathers, sometimes getting lost in unfamiliar places. There were no signposts and lights on dark mornings and dark nights had to be very dim. I enjoyed the variety of the work, the outdoor life and the kindness and good humour of everyone I met.'