

Bubnell Cliff Farm : Wartime Recollections.

"Tha' does alright for a lass". A freezing cold morning and I am out in a field, with another worker, wresting uprooted turnips off the icy earth, nose running, fingers numb, strands of hair whipping across my face in the wind. In 1943 I was 18 years old and had just left boarding school and been conscripted to work as a land girl on Bubnell Cliff Farm, Baslow. I cycled from home, twice a day, up Wheatlands Lane, stars often still shining on Winter mornings, as clocks in the war were set at Double Summer Time. Always, as I came down the long farm track, a flock of geese would gather and cackle towards me, hissing and flapping their threatening wings. I was rather nervous of these noisy birds, but the farmer's daughter, who was mentally disabled, a quaint little figure, in a red hood, would trot amongst them, without fear. She used to look at me, and start chanting: "Miss Raaaaanolds", in a kind of friendly amusement, as if she realised that my presence on the farm was different from the ordinary. And, yes, I was always referred to as Miss Reynolds, which now seems strange in our day when there is universal use of first names. I never went further into the house than the gloomy kitchen and have an idea that there was no electricity. The lavatory was outside in a cobwebby shed. Milking was done by hand, but I did not need to learn this skill, as I was mostly employed as a general helper. A daily task was mucking out the cattle shippens, shovelling up piles of strawy manure, brushing swill from the rough stone floors and skewering the odd slithery afterbirth on a fork, before barrowing it all off to the muck heap. This was left to mature then loaded in a cart to be spread on the land, heave and fling, heave and fling, across the fields. Sometimes, the horse jerked suddenly forward and a swift rush of muck flumped over the open back of the cart. It had a tail board which fastened with what were known as cotter pins, i.e. long iron pegs with a looped top. The Farmer was a man with a very fierce temper and even quite small offences could put him in an alarming rage. We dreaded losing a cotter pin, as this was considered a particularly serious misdeed, but one day I did just that.("O, where is it?") Scrattle, scrattle, in the mud, but it was gone. What to do? I used to go home for lunch so was able to call on the local blacksmith (who was rather charmingly named Mr. Derbyshire) and beg him to find me a cotter pin. He was a genial character and, knowing where I worked, grasped the situation at once and produced an instant replacement. It was not quite the original shape, but it fitted and the day was saved!

I was sometimes sent out alone to fetch the cattle, including the bull, from a distant pasture, up hill, down dale, the farm gradually receding from sight. One needed to get round the back of the herd and start them moving in the direction of home, but the bull would often stop and look towards me, which was decidedly unsettling, even more so if he then began to paw the ground and bash his horns into the grass. "Cu-op! Cu-op!". Keep going, cows... But, when the bull actually did charge me this was in the yard. THUMP! A heavy blow on my back, making me stumble, but luckily it was parried by a big bale of hay that I had over my shoulder and there was a chance to nip to safety. The Farmer's Wife had seen what was happening from the kitchen window and rushed out, gasping: "I thought he'd get you down, like he did the Mole Catcher!" That unfortunate man had been hospitalized. The bull had a special stall when stabled, very narrow and confined. I can still remember having to squeeze past his bulging flanks in order to stand in a small gap by his head and reach for the chain to tie him up. It was a dangerous trap and if I had slipped and fallen under those restive hooves, who knows, what then?

One day, in the fields, I was suddenly confronted with a soldier, in what looked to be full battle kit! ("O, hello?"). He seemed to have sprung from nowhere, as the farm was very isolated and there had been no sound of vehicles or a plane. He had a cheery smile and asked me to direct him to the nearest river, but not to say exactly where he was, so I

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presumed that it was some sort of Army exercise, but have since wondered if this soldier was quite what he appeared?

The Farmer's gentle wife was very kind to me and would bring out a mug of tea on the quiet. The two sons (both only about my own age) had taken after her and were always ready to give a friendly hand with any job that I just could not manage, such as using a manual hay cutter to chop a section out of the stack or lifting a huge bag of potatoes. They were the main labour force & worked all hours of the day, with very little time off from the farm. Additional help came with short-stay boys, who had got into some kind of trouble and were in care of the authorities. These were town lads and must have found it hard discipline to toil in the wilds of Derbyshire. It is a pity that I did not keep a diary of those days, as it is so long ago and there will be much that I have now forgotten, but it was a valuable experience, with moments of real enjoyment from the satisfaction of physical endeavor and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. My time as a land girl ended when I contracted cattle ringworm, which became badly infected so that for weeks my hands, fingers splayed, were encased in cumbersome bandages. Dr. Evans then put down his medical foot and refused to allow me to return to the farm. About 20 years later, I was walking on Gorse Bank Lane with a friend when we paused to watch a tractor ploughing in a field. To my surprise, the driver got down and came over to us, saying that he thought he recognised me as having worked at Bubnell Cliff Farm? I had no idea that this local farmer had observed my wartime efforts from his own nearby land. Apparently, he had only recently been talking about me to his teenage children ("You don't know what work is! You should have seen that young girl, what she had to do, out in all weathers.") This unexpected encounter and even more unexpected praise gave me a rather rewarding sense that perhaps that lass in the turnip field had indeed done alright....

JAN REYNOLDS -2006

Author of: The Williams Family of Painters: William Callow: Birket Foster, etc