

The best kept secrets are behind the trees

By Joanna Foat

My daughters attended St. Nicolas Infant School from 2005 to 2009, during this time I became the Chair of the Parent Staff Association (PSA) for a year and attended many a school church service. It was such a happy time and hugely rewarding to be at the heart of such a thriving and friendly community.

I joined the PSA as a way of bridging the gap between parenting and working, keeping my hand in with marketing and communications work, while also helping the school raise funds and its profile at the same time. I loved the classroom views, looking out through the leaves. But hidden behind the trees on the Portsmouth Road meant this wonderful school remained a well kept secret.

But not for long! Within a year the school successes became more well known and my work there helped me to get a voluntary communications job at Alice Holt Forest. I wrote stories about family events and school educational visits in the forest for the local press. After four months, I was lucky to be offered a part time contract as a communications consultant for the Forestry Commission.

My boss told me he was proud of his all female management team, so I pitched the idea of women in forestry to BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour. And this was how I first discovered the story of the Women's Timber Corps, more affectionately known as the Lumberjills. But their story was a well kept secret too. Nobody had ever heard of them and they received no recognition after the war, so I decided I had to tell their story.

There were in fact between 15,000 and 18,000 Lumberjills working behind the trees, producing timber in WW2, for everything from aircraft and shipbuilding to communications, construction and coal mining. These women worked with an axe and saw, in haulage, in saw mills, calculated wages and timber production figures. Without them our timber needs during war could not have been met.

I was particularly delighted to discover one Lumberjill called Elizabeth Joyce Gaster who worked at Alice Holt Forest, where I worked for four years. She lived in Dockenfield and worked with a dozen others. She was one of the longest standing members of the Women's Timber Corps with six years service and as a result represented the Women's Timber Corps in the victory parade in London on 8 June 1946.

"Then we were off round Marble Arch and down Oxford Street. We had a band just behind us, so it helped us with our marching. It seemed strange to be marching through all those cheering crowds and they really did give the W.L.A. an extra loud cheer along the route but what's gladdened the hearts of the timber girls most of all was to hear someone shout 'Timber' as we went past."

Lumberjills – Britain's Forgotten Army by Joanna Foat is published by the History Press and costs £14.99 To purchase the book visit www.thelumberjills.uk or www.thehistorypress.co.uk