

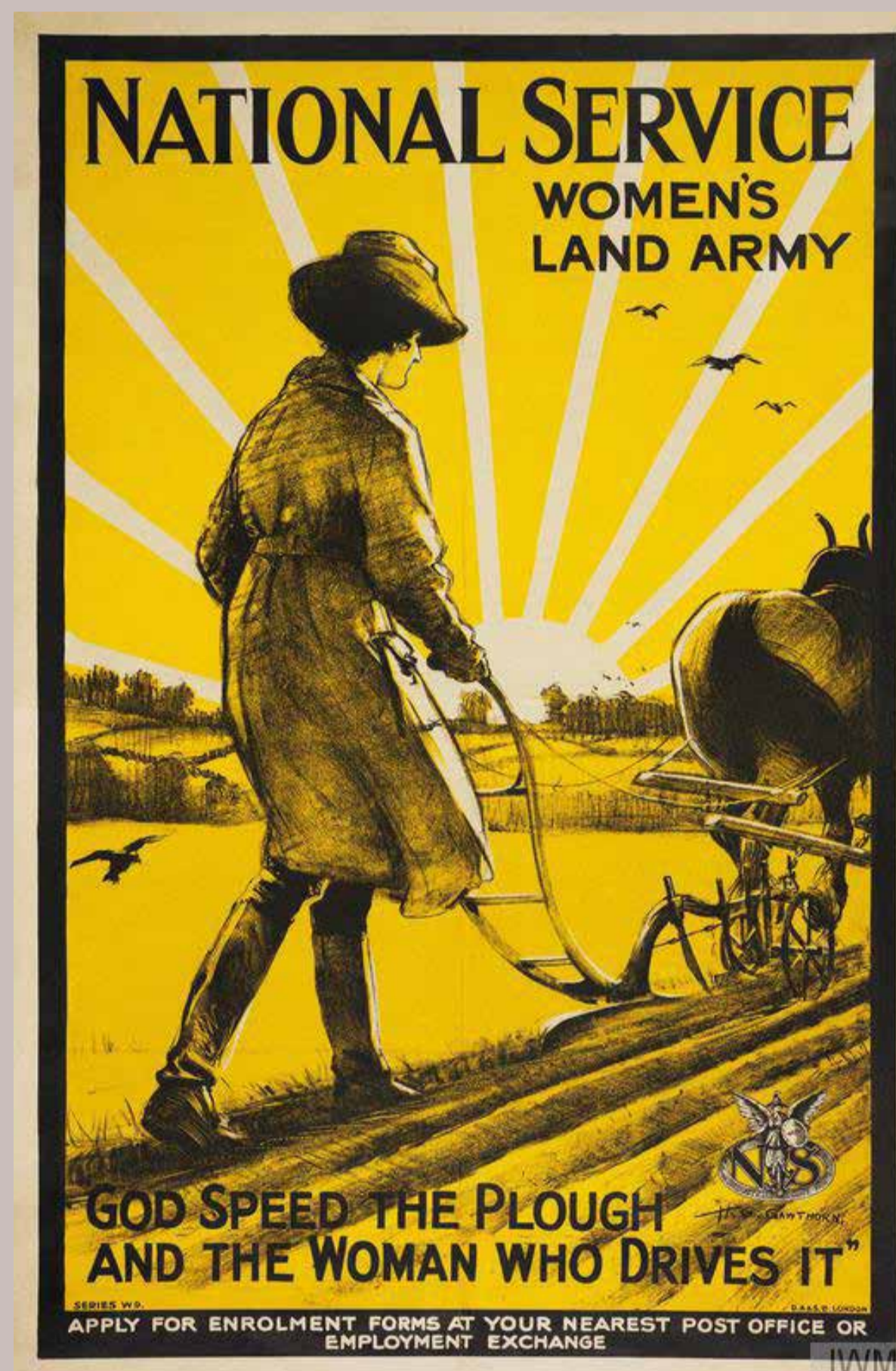
PLOUGHING UP

“Without the women of Britain, the nation could have starved.”

In Great Britain during World War I hundreds of thousands of male farm workers left the fields for the front line meaning those left behind were expected to produce the food for the nation. Reliance on no longer available imports and food shortages looming after poor harvests in 1916 the Government turned to British farmers to feed Britain. A ploughing up Campaign was introduced to turn pastures over to arable production, something that had been neglected for more than 70 years. British farmers were faced with a seemingly impossible task. Feeding the nation with a shortage of horses, a lack of machinery and a short supply of men would be a remarkable achievement.



A member of the Women's Land Army operating a single furrow plough on a British farm during WWI. ©IWM (Q54607)



Recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army, 1917. The Women's Land Army quickly began to recruit women for agriculture and organise 'gangs' for farm work.

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Replacing lost labour proved difficult so in 1917, the war office released soldiers to help with the spring cultivation and harvest and the Women's Land Army was formed to provide extra labour on the farm. By 1918, the area of land under arable production had increased by 2.5 million acres with nearly nine million acres of land planted with grain and potatoes - the largest harvest the country had ever seen.

In 1918, there were more than 223,000 women in agriculture with 8,000 working in the WLA performing the same tasks as men to continue producing food for Britain. By 1915 the Board of Agriculture developed a scheme for training women to do agricultural work in agricultural colleges across the country. This training focused on milking and 'light' farm work which 218 women signed up and 199 found work afterwards.

If women were working on the farm for over 30 days they were entitled to wear an armlet of military appearance to demonstrate to others that they were doing their duty for their country, the armlet was khaki with a red crown.