



**Timber Girls**, funded by the heritage lottery uncovered and celebrated a hidden history of female forestry during the Great War, at the same time exploring what girls today feel about timber production.

Woman tutors taught 45 girls how to hand fell timber and use horses to extract it, commemorating 100 years since women undertook this work during World War I, and providing female role-models from the past and today. Through this celebration of women's wartime contribution, the project aimed to inspire girl's perceptions of forestry, whilst learning more about their views of the industry.

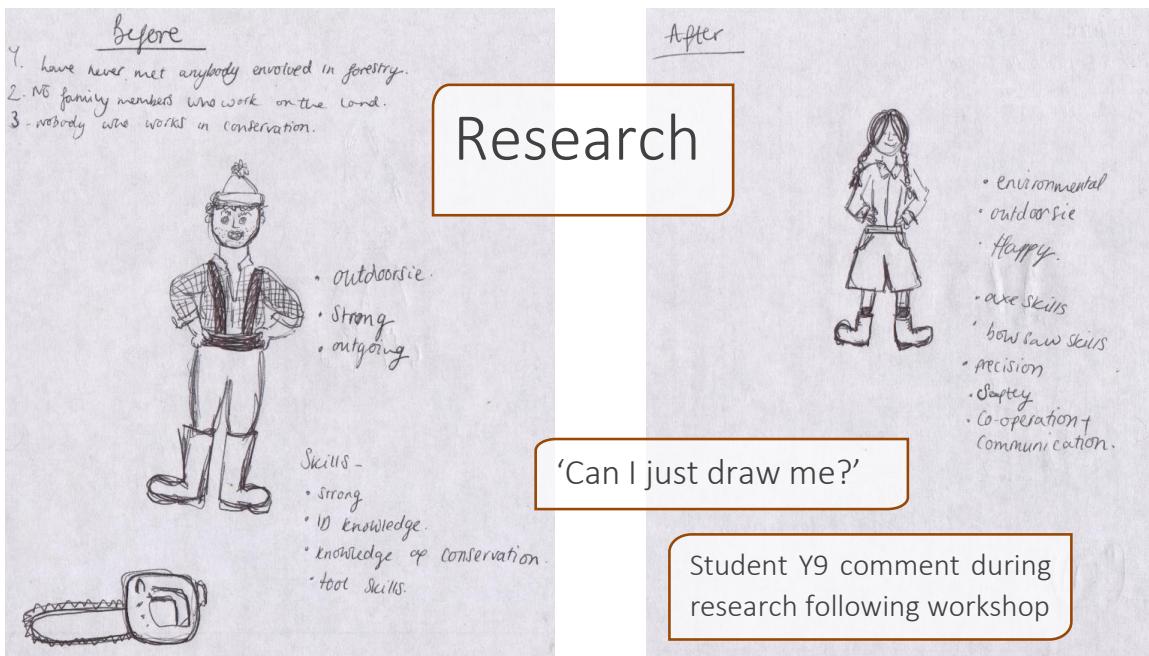
Before they took part in Timber Girls, we asked students to tell us what kind of people they think foresters are and what skills they have. Through drawing and description girls revealed perceptions that must impact their feelings about forestry training and careers. Why do these findings matter? Well, they are information that might help us understand more about why there is a significant gender imbalance in recruitment to Forestry in the UK.



We discovered that students taking part in Timber Girls were likely to picture a Forester as a physically robust man who fells trees with processes or equipment that might require unusual courage. Such ideas could well contribute to girls feeling precluded from forestry careers.

As well as re-creating their efforts, Timber Girls asked participants to consider the attitudinal barriers and challenges to women working on timber production during WWI, when even advocates for female forestry argued that women's contribution would need to be limited to less physical tasks. However, experiments on the home front with women undertaking every aspect of timber processing grew confidence that women could and must perform this ground-breaking war effort.

Re-enacting women's forestry work in WWI helped students reflect on their own ability and enthusiasm to take on such tasks. Some worried that it might be too physically demanding, dangerous or difficult to learn. However, every girl took part in felling, processing and moving timber and this capacity and ability, as well as their enjoyment, has been recorded in the [Timber Girls Film](#).



Despite successfully practicing forestry skills, students described the judgement and criticism they anticipate from male peers when they try such hands-on and physically demanding activities. Girls also compared the contemporary, institutionalised gender judgments preventing them playing rugby or football at their schools with resistance towards female forestry in WWI. Interestingly, students felt female pupils who chose not to take part in Timber Girls could have already decided they are not 'outdoorsy' and that practical outside activity might conflict with their developing, feminine self-image. Again, this feedback may reveal much about the kinds of social and cultural influence that prevent girls considering a future in forestry or other land-based employment.

**What's exciting** is that, using the hidden heritage of women forestry workers in WWI, the Timber Girls project helped reveal these ideas and supported students to think of forestry as a female occupation. Uncovering the history of these pioneering female foresters and practicing their skills under female tuition contributed to a change in how girls described 'A Forester'. After taking part in Timber Girls, students were much more likely to imagine and characterise a Forester as female or unisex: as themselves, as their friends, as anyone. Taking part helped them focus less on strength as a prerequisite for working in Forestry and more on less gendered attributes, such as being hard-working. Students were also more likely to consider Foresters 'normal', after their experiences in the project.

Questions remain about the influences that encourage or obstruct women becoming Foresters, particularly where they originate and their impact on male recruitment. However, Timber girl's findings suggest that messages about outdoor work in relation to masculine and feminine ideals may have a significant impact on attitudes to forestry, just as they did in WWI.

# Summary of findings and project reflections

Girls taking part in research *before* Timber Girls workshops reported that:

- the majority imagine a Forester to be male
- physical strength and height are the most notable characteristics of Foresters
- when thinking about Forestry and Foresters they most frequently imagine the field of expertise and activity associated with timber felling
- some imagine Foresters to be out of the ordinary and possibly more courageous than other people

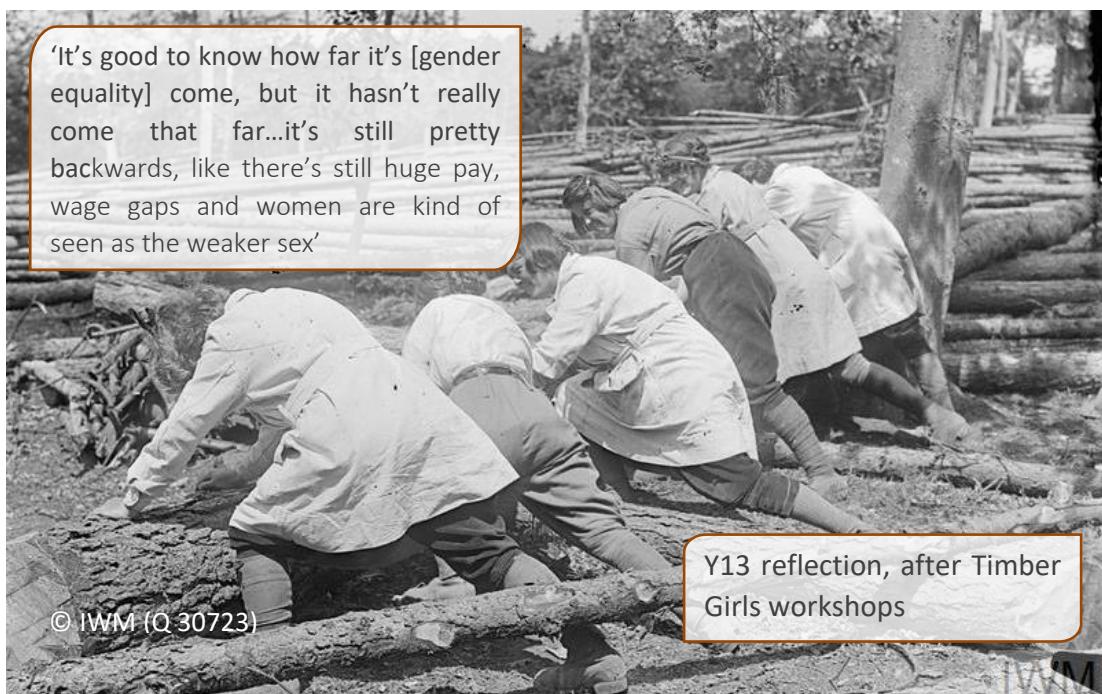


Reflections: Engage female students directly with a wide range of experiences of 'Forest Industry'

Girls may need a better and broader understanding of what 'Forestry' and a 'Forester' might be if they are to imagine a place within it, from men and women working in industrial scale timber harvesting and tree planting, to social enterprises managing a small woodland or working in social forestry. Students in our sample tended to think of a Forester as a man who fells trees with processes or equipment that might need you to be brave. One way to help overcome this is for Forest Industry to actively encourage a broader range of activity and people to be considered part of Forestry in the UK.

### Using a heritage focus to engage girls with Forestry and women's lives, then and now helped

- girls to consider gender relations then and now, and identify factors that may limit gender equality in recreation and employment
- reveal girl's feelings about their capacity to participate in forest industry and challenges and barriers to their participation
- reveal how girls perceive there to be an omnipresent male critique of their capacity to participate in hands-on and practical activities relevant to forestry industry
- students to consider the achievements of the female foresters of WWI in relation to their lives and modern forestry



### Reflections: Use a heritage focus to engage girls with forestry and their place within it

Girls attending Timber Girls workshops enjoyed both recreating the female forestry of WWI and using artifacts and stories to reflect further on that history. They actively related the past to their own lives and contrasted gender relations then and now. The heritage of female forestry, particularly during WWI and WWII could be developed, on behalf of Forest Industry, as material suited to the history curriculum of primary and secondary schools. Those already working within Forest Industry could also be encouraged to engage with this heritage and consider female forestry as having hidden, but notable historical precedents which can be celebrated and promoted to counter gendered stereotypes.

Girls taking part in research *after* Timber Girls workshops indicated that the workshops

- encouraged them imagine Foresters as female: as themselves, as their friends and as anyone
- supported them to focus less on strength as a prerequisite for workers in Forest Industry and more on possibly less gendered attributes or behaviors, such as being hardworking
- helped them to view Foresters as ‘normal’, not needing unusual qualities such as particular courage
- increased their view that Foresters are ‘outdoorsy’ people

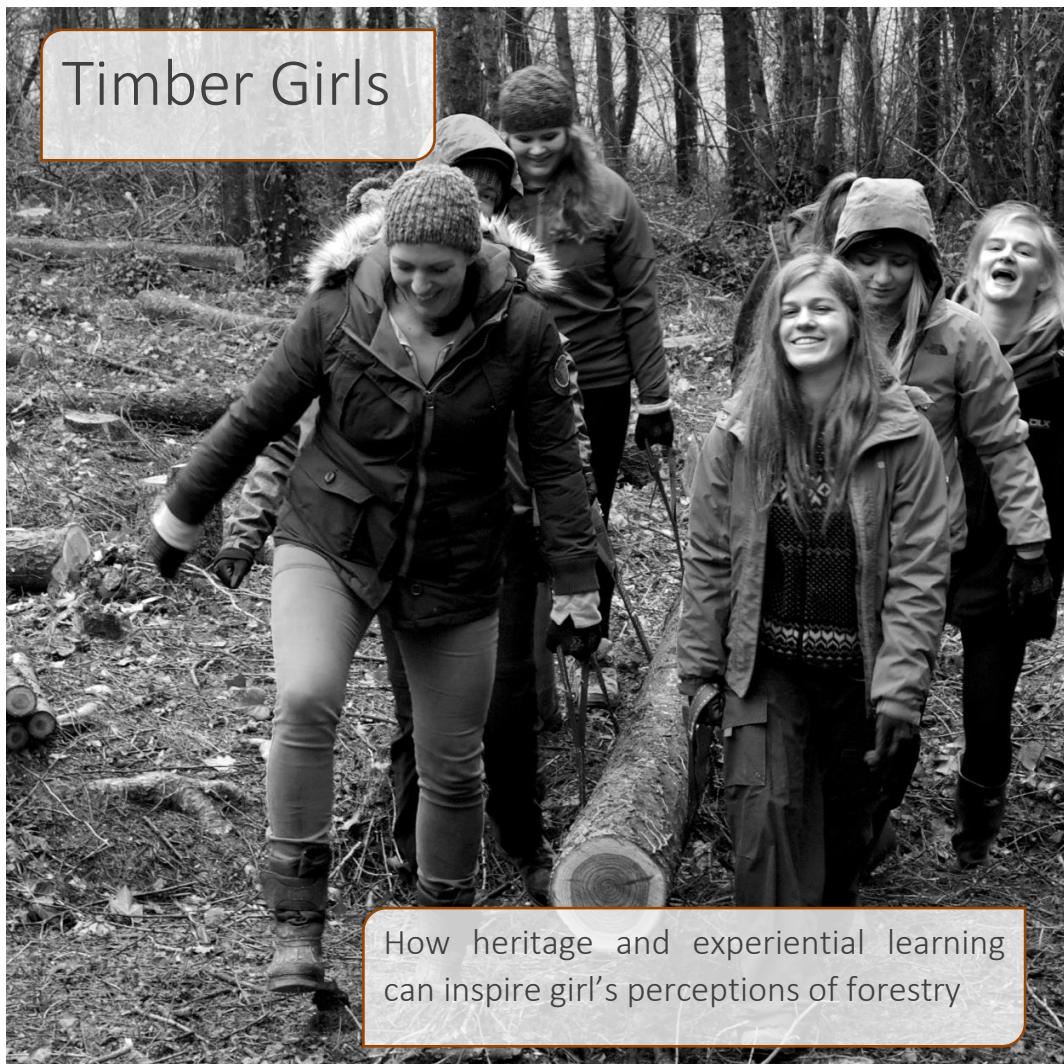


#### Reflections: Promote female foresters, then and now, and share their practice, skills and stories

Taking part in workshops helped girls to consider Forestry as a female occupation and something ‘normal’ people can do. In this small study, it is difficult to differentiate how key factors (provision of female role-models from the past, female foresters leading workshops and student’s undertaking practical forestry tasks themselves), each contributed to this change. However, using female role-modeling and skill-sharing clearly can contribute to inspiring girl’s perceptions of female forestry. Increased identification, inclusion and celebration of women Forester’s stories and practice in Forest Industry P.R, events and outreach could make good use of this use of this means of encouragement.

#### Reflections: Further research exploring why both girls and boys are increasingly less likely to consider Forestry as a training and career

Timber Girls explores the perceptions and experiences of a small sample of girls taking part in workshops in North Devon. Striking consistencies in its findings however, could be explored in greater depth to generate a better understanding of why girls, and boys, aren’t entering Forestry in the UK. Ideas around Foresters needing to be courageous, strong, out of the ordinary and outdoorsy could act as challenges to both sexes in considering a Forestry career. Girls receive gender specific messages around ‘safety’ and ‘science’ that have been explored within research as barriers to particular educational and lifestyle pathways. Timber girl’s data suggests that alongside such ideas, messages about people having an ‘outdoorsy’ predisposition and stereotypes within that idea (it enables an unfeminine love of ‘mud’ or is associated with being less socially popular) may influence girls, or indeed both sexes in attitudes towards land-based employment and recreation.



The Timber Girls project was developed by Courage Copse Creatives in partnership with The North Devon Biosphere Foundation. Participants from schools and F.E colleges in North Devon travelled to the Courage Copse Woodland to take part in workshops and research.

**Find out more** on the Courage Copse Creatives Website, which hosts the Timber Girls film, more information about female forestry in WWI and the full research report - <http://www.local-devon-biochar-charcoal.co.uk/project/timber-girls-heritage-project/>

Research and reporting, Dr Alice Goodenough on behalf of North Devon Biosphere Foundation & Courage Copse Creatives, August 2017. For further details of the research contact Alice, alice.goodenough@btinternet.com

