

WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

Winkleigh Women's Institute meets at 2.30pm on the first Wednesday of the month in the Small Room of the Village Hall.

In November we are making a Christmas tree and December we will be having a games afternoon including a Beetle Drive. All are welcome.

WHAT IS THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE

Although the Women's Institute was first formed, in Canada, in 1897, it wasn't until 1915 that we had our first British WI (**YES THE WI MOVEMENT IS 100 YEARS THIS YEAR!**) and now there are 6600 WIs with approximately 214,000 members spread throughout England, Wales, The Channel Islands and The Isle of Man. (Scotland and Northern Ireland have separate organisations).

The WIs are grouped into 70 County and Island Federations and together they make up the National Federation with its headquarters in London. It is the largest **voluntary** organisation for women and is educational, social, non-party political, non-sectarian and (as previously mentioned) has its own adult education centre at Denman in Oxfordshire. The WI (whose income principally comes from annual subscriptions, supplemented by profits from its trading company) has close international links through its affiliation to the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW) with millions of women, worldwide.

What is the background of the WI?

The first 'Women's Institute' was formed in Stoney Creek, Ontario, Canada, by Adelaide Hoodless in 1897 - as an offshoot of the Farmer's Institute.

Adelaide Hoodless's youngest boy had died at the age of fourteen months from an intestinal infection caused by drinking contaminated milk and for the rest of her life Adelaide campaigned for domestic science to be taught in schools and colleges.

She lectured on the subject all over Ontario with the prime aim of improving the overall understanding of domestic economy - particularly for women who lived isolated lives in rural homesteads.

The first meeting of the Women's Institute took place at the home of Janet Lee and she was elected as one of the first Committee Members.

Over the next few years she visited other Farmer's Institutes to encourage the formation of more WIs and in the early 1900s, Mrs Madge Watt from British Columbia brought the idea of the Women's Institute to Britain.

With the declaration of war in 1914 (and knowing that supplies of food was going to be a particular problem in UK) Madge Watt convinced the Government that the concept of a Woman's Institute was something that could help to revitalise the countryside in Britain and they quickly asked her to set up a similar organisation in the UK.

During her life Mrs Watt formed well over 300 WIs including (at the invitation from Queen Mary) one at Sandringham.

So much for the background....

On 11th September 1915 the first WI in Britain was formed at:

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GOGOCH

(commonly referred to as Llanfair PG) in Anglesey. Dolton and Dowland were also formed in 1915 and became one of first Wis in Devon – if not **the** first!

During the First World War, the WI encouraged countrywomen to get involved in growing and preserving food in order to help the War effort in addition, that is, to preparing meals, looking after the calves, the pigs, the hens, the ducks and the geese etc. - so not much has changed has it?!

In the summer of 1916, the first ever WI market was held by the Criccieth Woman's Institute in Wales.

By 1917, a total of 137 Institutes had been formed and members of the Woman's Institute took part in the Hyde Park Exhibition. It was also in this year that all of the Institutes in Sussex decided that they would like to meet together and so the first Federation was formed. This led to the formation of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) when the rules were adopted and an Executive Committee was established. Lady Denman was voted Chairman and Alice Williams was appointed Honorary Secretary and Treasurer and this new organisation attracted members from the Lady of the Manor, to her housemaid and cook, from the local shop keeper to the wife of the farm labourer.

Once the war was over, Women's Institutes began to concentrate on planning programmes of activities suitable for their members. Women, of course, had now received the vote (well at least those over 30 had) and the NFWI was anxious to encourage them to become active citizens. Indeed, at the 1920 Annual General Meeting (AGM), a resolution was carried urging WI members to stand for Parish and District councils and especially for committees that dealt with health and housing. Yet another urged more emphasis on public health education.

By now, interest in music was growing. Many WIs formed their own choirs and the NFWI brought out the first Women's Institute Song Book - a collection of songs particularly suitable for singing at monthly meetings. In 1923 the first WI choral competition for choirs was held in East Sussex and in that year, Chulmleigh WI was formed.

At the 1924 AGM (held in Queens Hall, London) Sir Walford Davies (a famous British composer and Master of the Kings Music) made a special arrangement of Sir Hubert Parry's setting of Jerusalem and he, personally, conducted the singing at that Meeting. Later the NFWI ran a competition for an '*Institute Song*' and it was unanimously agreed that this should be Jerusalem and by singing this 'song' the WI is marking its links with the wider women's movement, and its commitment to '*improving the conditions of rural life*'

On the 8th March 1927 the Winkleigh WI was formed.

Ashreigney's WI was also formed in the same year and by 1928 the WI had become firmly established in the countryside with a total of 4244 WIs. There was always a light hearted feel to activities with members taking part in some very ambitious pageants and plays, music festivals and organising country dancing.

In 1934 Chawleigh WI was formed and in 1937, the 21st AGM passed a Resolution against the destruction of wild flowers – **but**, it wasn't until 1975 that it was finally passed by Government!!

In 1938 Lapford WI held their first meeting.

When war seemed inevitable, the NFWI had to decide what role it would play and Lady Denman was appointed Director of the Women's Land Army. A Section of this Land Army were the "Rat Catchers". They were quite a formidable force and their numbers included one of our Winkleigh Members (Marion Short).

The NFWI also felt that it was very important to maintain the Institute meetings as normally as possible during the Second World War and the WIs became an important link with the Armed Forces, forged by the donation of an Ambulance.

The WI also played an important role in caring for evacuees and were invited by the Ministry of Agriculture to organise a **Co-operative Fruit Preservation Scheme**. To achieve this objective the NFWI, having bought £1,400 worth of sugar, then distributed it round the Federations who in turn sent it out to those WIs prepared to take part in the scheme. Between 1940 and 1945 over 5,300 tons of fruit was preserved; making use of nearly 12 million pounds of fruit which might otherwise have been wasted. This was the war work for which WI members became renowned - and the '**jam**' image has stuck ever since!

In 1946 the First Combined Arts Festival was opened by HM the Queen and in that same year the Channel Islands WI opened followed two years later by the formation of the Isle of Man Federation.

Highlights of the next decade included:

- 1950 - AGM Resolution urging the Government to ensure that hospitals made allowances for parents to visit children;
- 1951 - as part of the Festival of Britain, members designed the WI house which was built at the Ideal Home Exhibition in Olympia. This house was intended for a working family – and even had a porch outside the back door to leave muddy boots;
- 1953 - Princess Elizabeth attended her first WI Meeting as our new Queen and meanwhile the WIs interest in Home Handicrafts continued;
- 1955 - the Keep Britain Tidy Anti-Litter Campaign was formed by the NFWI and at the 1956 AGM, concern was expressed about the withdrawal of bus and rail services – which is something we are still doing today, so not much has changed!
- 1958 - Denman College put on its first Flower Show and Constance Spry was invited to judge the competition. The show was an overwhelming success with more than 4,000 WI members attending and entries coming from 44 counties.

The WIs Golden Jubilee in 1965 was celebrated in great style with, amongst other celebrations, was a garden party at Buckingham Palace to which the Queen invited her fellow members – and my Mother in Law (Mrs Vera Tricker from the Rustington WI) was one of the lucky Presidents who was chosen to attend!).

New teaching buildings at Denman College were opened by HM the Queen Mother in 1970 and by 1974 there were a total of 9,309 WIs - the greatest number of WIs

ever recorded. A year later, the National Federation was awarded their own Coat of Arms.

During the late eighties and nineties, the subjects of the resolutions debated at the Annual Meetings continued to reflect women's concerns for current issues and during this period, the NFWI became a charitable company limited by guarantee.

Another successful WI/Rotary venture was the Aqua Box Collection. This was similar to the Tsunami Appeal and was intended to help areas hit by disasters by providing them with a box filled with everyday necessities such as toiletries and sewing essentials etc. The box was ingeniously designed so that it could be used as water container (complete with tap) after it had been emptied. Winkleigh WI held many fund raising events and were able to supply one complete box for the appeal.

The WI history of campaigning

The WI has a long history of campaigning on a wide range of issues that matter to women and their communities and our campaigns are as diverse as our members. The history of the WI in campaigns tells a story of millions of women, often ahead of their time, committed to working in partnership to change the world for the better and over the years, the WI has passed many Resolutions and here are just some:

- equal pay for equal work;
- an anti-litter campaign - which eventually led to the formation of Keep Britain Tidy;
- no smoking in public places (this was in 1964!);
- the introduction of breast screening clinics – this resulted in the government introducing a number of mobile screening clinics followed by a national screening programme for all women aged 50 – 64, the first of its kind in the EU;
- the need for public facing information campaigns on HIV and AIDs;
- raising awareness on the nature and extent of violence against women;
- the plight of the honeybee;
- the preservation of ancient buildings;
- stricter control of drugs etc.;
- asking for improved water supplies in villages;
- more stringent control about the use of toxic sprays;
- concern about the dangers of radiation and experimental nuclear testing;
- raising concern about the availability of habit forming drugs to children and young people;
- a national policy for reclamation, re-use and recycling of waste (and this 40 years ago!!);
- doorstep milk deliveries;
- single sex wards in hospitals;
- closure of village schools;
- artificially produced human embryos;

\$1- child abuse;

- heavier sentences for rapists;
- making regeneration of Brownfield sites a priority;
- concern about genetically modified food;
- concern about the continuing decline of our high streets and the damaging effect this has on local communities;
- the need to employ more Midwives;
- the closure of Local Libraries

Many of these resolutions have been passed by the Government and have now become law and we are hopeful that this year's WI Resolution (i.e. the need for more voluntary Organ Donations) will be treated in a similar manner.

So, what is the situation today?

From a humble beginning in 1897 the Federated Women's Institute of Canada now has 1,257 branches distributed throughout 10 provinces with 18,000 members.

In Britain there are still about 6600 Individual WIs and over 214,000 members – thereby proving that women **can** continue to make a difference in this high-tech and fast-moving decade!!

More locally, Winkleigh WI meet on the first Wednesday of every month (except for August) in the Small Room at the back of the Village Hall at 7.30pm - please see the village notice boards for details. Why not come and join us as a visitor or a new member?

For further details please contact Claire Tricker either by phone (01837 83285) or by e-mail (claire@herne.org.uk).