

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2017

The History of The Women's Institute

The September meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society was an illustrated presentation tracing 100 years plus of the Women's Institute, given by Wendy England and Judy Palmer, advisors from the Berkshire Federation of the WI. The organisation is blossoming at present, with several new branches having been opened in the county in the last few years.

The Women's Institute is the largest organisation for women in the United Kingdom, and is a non party-political, non sectarian, educational charity, which was founded to educate women in the rural areas (although there are now also branches in towns and cities). It had its origins in the rural community of Stoney Creek, Ontario, Canada, in 1897. A talk given by Adelaide Hunter Hoodless to the local Farmer's Institute was the inspiration to form an organisation to educate women in the rural areas (where homesteads were widely scattered). The word Institute was used for an organisation whose purpose was education, and so the name Women's Institute was the natural one to adopt.



When Madge Watt, an indomitable Canadian, suggested that a similar organisation be set up in England and Wales, she was told that it would never work, as the classes would not mix. However, in 1915 a branch was established on Anglesey, at Llanfair PG, on Anglesey, followed by one at Singleton in Sussex, with the first in Berkshire opening at Hurst in 1916. The badge adopted for the WI was based on that used by the Canadians, and bore the phrase "For Home and Country". As this was during WW1, members were given hints various practical skills, such as fruit picking or pruning trees, and so were an important asset 'food-wise' during the war. In 1917 the organisation held its first AGM, when Lady Denman was elected as National Chairman. She was the wife of a former governor of Australia, and guided the WI for the next 30 years. In 1919 the first WI Market was established, in Lewes, and although no such events are no longer held, many members often contribute produce to country markets. William Blake's poem "Jerusalem" was adopted as their anthem in 1924, sung to the tune by Hubert Parry, and is still often sung at meetings.



By 1938, with the outbreak of WW2, the members of the WI played a vital role in the Evacuation Scheme., when children from vulnerable towns and cities were resettled into rural areas considered less at risk. The ladies of the WI also contributed by making jam and canning fruit. Some 5300 tons (ie about 12 million pounds) of fruit was preserved - in many cases using canning machines provided by the United States. The government recognised the importance of this work by allocating additional sugar to the normal rations to enable the jam to be made - jam making becoming an activity for which the WI has become renowned.

At the end of the war, in 1945, Lady Brunner, a member of the Oxfordshire committee, who lived at Greys Court, near Henley, thought the membership needed a new and exciting challenge. Sir Richard Livingstone, of Oxford University had sown the idea during the war of a WI college, this became the new project, where ladies could learn new skills. Marcham Park, a 100 acre estate with a large house and

cottages near Abingdon, was bought for £16,000, and adapted to its new role, being renamed Denman College when it opened in 1948. It received a grant from the Ministry of Education for the "development of liberal education of women", whilst the various county federations contributed to the cost of the living accommodation for course participants. Lady Brunner became the National Chairman in 1951 - the year when WI members were asked to design a house for the Ideal Home Exhibition, suitable for a working family -. It included a back porch where muddy boots could be removed! The Festival of Britain also took place that year, for which an embroidered mural was created called "The Country Wife", depicting many rural activities. After the Festival it was kept at Denman College, although it is now undergoing specialist embroidery conservation work.

The WI has embarked on a number of campaigns over the years, such as initiating what became the "Keep Britain Tidy" anti-litter campaign, or raising awareness of hazardous chemicals in household products, including a 78,000 signature petition to Brussels, whilst in 1993 it was a founder member of the Fairtrade Foundation.

Members of the Royal family have been involved with the Institute from its early days, with Queen Mary joining the Sandringham branch in 1919 - and the present Queen attends their meetings at least once a year. The Princess Royal and the Countess of Wessex are also currently members. In 1979, the Queen visited Denman College to open a new home economics centre - a new cookery school was added there in 2009, with 12 work stations for those on courses. The Queen has also attended several of the Annual Meetings - such as for the 75th anniversary, and the centennial event in 2015. At the latter she had difficulty cutting the celebratory cake - Princess Anne suggesting she had bent the knife!



It was said there is "nothing you cannot do in the WI", but maybe one of the more 'unexpected' was "Calendar Girls" produced by the Rylstone branch ladies in 2003. Intended to raise money for furnishing a local hospital waiting room, it gained much publicity for the WI, both directly and as a result of the feature film that followed. Other activities that attracted attention have included television appearances, such as on the Alan Titchmarsh Show, or with Lawrence Llewellyn-Bowen for a Queen's Diamond Jubilee Street Party. In 2000, when the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair addressed the annual meeting at Wembley. He committed a great 'faux pas' in launching into political comment. Being a non party-political organisation, this was not appropriate, and was met with a slow hand clap - but it also gave the WI much welcome publicity!

Now with over 210,000 members in 6300 branches in the United Kingdom, the WI continues to thrive, based on the principles of fellowship, truth, tolerance and justice, where education, fun and friendship still prevail, and offering support to women in less fortunate situations, internationally (through the Association of Country Women of the World).

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, October 10th, when Martin Andrews will enlighten us on the connections of the pioneer photographer William Henry Fox-Talbot to the Reading area, and then on Tuesday, November 14th John Harrison, who leads the team of bell ringers at All Saints, Wokingham, will look at the Living Heritage that is the social history of bell ringing, from the 18th century to the modern era, whilst on Tuesday, December 12th, the Society will hold its Christmas Party.