

The WI and the Women's Suffrage Movement.

The Women's Institute Movement began at a key time for women. In 1915 the war had begun to break down many of the social barriers that had existed before the war, and women were being forced to take a more active role in the community as the men were away in the armed services. At the same time the women's suffrage movement had been making people, including women themselves, re-evaluate their position in society.

John Nugent Harris, General Secretary of the Agricultural Organisations Society, which was instrumental in getting the WI movement established wrote later: 'The suffragists made the pot to boil.....the Institute movement showed how some things could be got out of the pot'.

Many of the women involved in setting up the NFWI had been active in the women's suffrage movement and they saw in the WIs a way of educating and encouraging women to take an active part in public life.



Lady Denman

Lady Denman, the first National Chairman, had been a member of the Women's Liberal Federation and had been an active supporter of the suffragists. **Grace Hadow**, was her Vice Chairman for most of the time from 1917 until her untimely death in 1940.



Grace Hadow

Grace went up to Somerville College Oxford in 1900, at a time when a first class education was rare for a girl. She obtained a first class in the Honours school of English Language and Literature but, as a woman at that time, was not allowed to receive her degree. Following a year teaching at Bryn Mawr in America she returned to Somerville and a year later became resident English tutor at Lady Margaret Hall. She was a founder member of the Oxford Women Students Society for Women's Suffrage and was there when the members bore its magnificent banner in the great procession for Women's Suffrage of 1908 to the Albert Hall. She said 'I am glad that I belong to a generation which has been stoned – not because I like being stoned (it is tiresome, and often messy), but since some women had to go through that to win the thing, it is a bit of luck not to have been out of it entirely. I record it here because it looks as if one of the results of the war was going to be the grant of the parliamentary franchise to women. In years to come it may interest people to realise that before the war law-abiding and peaceful women like myself, quite inconspicuous members of a political party, got to take being mobbed and insulted as part of the ordinary day's work.' She sent her congratulation to Mrs Fawcett when the Women's Suffrage clause was passed, and kept the reply for the rest of her life.

Her biographer comments that 'She worked hard to turn minds in favour of improving educational opportunities for women'. She was involved in a number of initiatives to improve the status of women. She set up a branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in Cirencester and then in 1916 she became President of the newly formed Cirencester WI (where she was living at the time, nursing her elderly Mother).

After the death of her mother, in mid 1917, she was appointed Director of the Welfare department of the Ministry of Munitions, where the health and wellbeing of women munitions workers was a priority. In the same year she was elected Vice Chairman of the NFWI executive committee working closely with Lady Denman.

Grace Hadow felt it essential that women learned to take responsibility and learned how to run the organisation along democratic lines; she was largely responsible for drafting the NFWI Constitution. Her professional life ran alongside her work with NFWI. She was Secretary of Barnet House in Oxford from 1920 - 1929 during which time she worked hard to get rural libraries established, was responsible for the setting up of the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, the first in the country. She was a member of the executive committee of the National Council for Social Services, the BBC Advisory Council and the Adult Education Committee of the Board of Education. From 1921 she was Principal of the Society of Oxford Home Students out of which grew St Anne's College. There is a memorial tablet to her in the University Church of St Mary in Oxford.



Lady Denman (right) and Helena Auerbach (left)

The first NFWI Treasurer, **Helena Auerbach**, lived in Surrey and from 1914-18 served on the Surrey Women's War Agriculture Committee. It was through this that she met Madge Watt and helped to form the first Surrey Institutes. As a young married woman, she joined the London Women's Suffrage Society and was co-opted onto the executive committee of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and became their Honorary Treasurer. She claimed to have been much influenced by Dame Millicent Fawcett, Lady Frances Balfour and Miss Margaret Ashton. She joined the NFWI executive committee in 1919 becoming Honorary Treasurer and remaining in that post until 1927.

Also on the first National Executive Committee was **Lady Isobel Margesson** who, as a member of the Women's Socialist and Political Union, had chaired many meetings at which Mrs Pankhurst had spoken, and had driven Mrs Pankhurst to meetings in her car.

It was not just the executive committee members but also the staff who had been involved. **Margaret Hitchcock** who was Lady Denman's first private secretary, was a suffragist who had worked as Secretary to the Colchester Suffrage Society and later as a full-time organiser for the Liberal Women's Suffrage Society. **Inez Fergusson** – later Jenkins – was appointed General Secretary to NFWI in 1919 when she was only 22 years old. Although so young she had already a considerable amount of experience. After study at St Hilda's Oxford she worked for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies and then was press secretary for the National Union for the Society of Equal Citizenship which worked for the representation of the People Act.



Inez Fergusson



Margaret Hitchcock

With leaders who had been so deeply involved in the suffrage movement, it is not surprising that one of the primary aims of NFWI was to educate women to become active citizens.

In 1918 Grace Hadow wrote:

‘The essence of Women's Institutes is their apostolic democracy.....The Women's Institute is for all alike; rich and poor, gentle and simple, learned and unlearned - all pay the same subscription, have the same privileges and the same responsibilities. Each member in turn acts as hostess to her fellow members; each puts her own practical knowledge at the service of the rest’.

‘Controversial subjects; religious or political are taboo, but interest in their own homes tends naturally and inevitably to interest in questions of housing, sanitation, infant welfare and kindred topics. The members learn to realise their responsibility towards the community in which they live, and, from an interest in their own village and their own country come to see the connection between their affairs and those of the nation at large. It would be difficult to plan a better training for the exercise of the vote - a training entirely divorced from all party or sectarian policies, based on the actual experiences of home life and home needs, and working outwards through a sense of responsibility educated not to take but to give’.

(Women's Institutes - by Grace Hadow - reprint from the Journal of the Board of Agriculture - Vol XXV no 7 October 1918)

It was not just the influential women on the National Executive Committee, but some of those in local WIs as who had been involved in the suffrage movement. One renowned person was **Edith Rigby**, the first President of Hutton and Howick WI in Lancashire who had been a suffragette and was gaoled 7 times, once for planting a bomb in the Liverpool Corn exchange. She went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed. Berkswell WI in Warwickshire had three members who had been keen supporters of the suffragette movement. They took a stone from Berkswell to London to throw through the window of 10 Downing Street and were later arrested and imprisoned for their activities.

Countrywomen in their institutes were making their first efforts towards organisation and public self expression. In the past, in village gatherings of men and women, they had commonly sat silent, but now they were to receive training and learn how to run their own organisation, and having learned that to move outwards to engage in public life. These were heady times, there were many who were:

'..... in membership not for what they can get - though they do get a great deal - but what they can give. They are educated women, women in circumstances of life they desire, and they have come to the movement, and work hard in it, because they ardently believe in it. As a leader said to me 'I have never been in any movement, except the suffrage, to compare with the return it gives'.

(Robertson Scott, History of WI p187)

The WIs having learned how to organise themselves were beginning to organise others in the village and this led to a general enlivenment of village life. Lady Denman urged that every member should be 'an energetic and thinking participant in her institute and through the Institute, in the life of the village'. WI members learned the correct procedure to run meetings, take minutes and speak in public.



Northumberland Federation Council Meeting 1923

The Government also appreciated the important part that the WI could play in the post-war reconstruction of rural areas; *The 1919 Report - the Final and Interim reports of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction 1918-1919* states:

'The rapid growth of the Women's Institute movement..... may be the beginning of a new chapter in the education of women in rural districts. These institutes are democratic in constitution, and the exceptional circumstances caused by war conditions have given great opportunity of enabling women of all classes and creeds to work together in the villages. Should they prove permanently successful in maintaining their democratic

character and in bringing in the poorer and less educated women on term of equality, they should play a great part in the future development of village life, and prove a powerful stimulus to education generally among women in the countryside.'

(The 1919 Report - the Final and Interim reports of the Adult Education Committee of the Ministry of Reconstruction 1918-1919)

With this background it is not surprising that the leaders encouraged interest in what was happening in Parliament. *Home and Country*, the WI magazine, carried frequent articles and special interest began to grow when, in 1921 a WI member was elected as an MP.

Margaret Winteringham was elected to Parliament as the Member for Louth and she became the second woman MP to take her seat and the first English born woman. She became known as 'Our Institute MP'.



Margaret Winteringham with Nancy Astor on Terrace of the House of Commons 1922



Margaret Winteringham in 1930

Her election was greeted with acclaim in *Home and Country*, which reported :

'The election of Mrs Winteringham to Parliament is a matter for rejoicing among Institute members, not only because she is a well known Institute worker, but also because she is the first woman to represent a rural constituency'.

Margaret had been the first Honorary Secretary of Lindsey (Lincolnshire) Federation, where her husband was the local MP. After her husband's sudden death she stood in the bye election and won the seat.

In 1922 Margaret was elected to the NFWI executive committee and this gave the WI a direct line of communication into the House of Commons, which they used for example on the issue of women police officers. Women had been recruited to the police force during the war, when there was a shortage of men, but now the government was trying to disband them, so at the 1922 AGM there

was a resolution about the importance of retaining women police. Delegates were told:

‘Lady Astor and Mrs Winteringham, who are fighting for women police in the House, are waiting to hear the opinion of all women on this question’.

The two women worked well together and Margaret Winteringham was later to describe their dual parliamentary role thus:

‘I felt she went about her task like a high stepping pony, while I stumbled along like a cart horse; but we both had our uses and worked in complete harmony together’.

WI members up in London for that AGM were invited by Margaret to be shown round the Houses of Parliament; she told them that her years of membership of her own WI had been the best training she could have had for her work as an MP. She also said how glad she was to have been elected as a member of NFWI executive committee since she felt that this was proof that the Institutes trusted her to work without any party bias.

She continued to help NFWI with matters parliamentary. She spoke at the AGM on various occasions and she also spoke to Federations on *Women’s Institutes and public life* and contributed articles to *Home & Country* on such complex matters as the Agricultural Wages (regulation) Act 1924.

Home and Country carried frequent articles of information and exhortation. For example: May 1920 *Housing Committees and Women’s Institutes*, in July 1920 *Ministry of Health Watching Council and its work*; September 1920: *National economy and Women’s Institutes*. By 1922 there was a regular column called ‘Current Events’ recorded by ‘Observer’ which included short briefings on bills – e.g. May 1922 Criminal Law Amendment Bill; Nov 1923 The Guardianship of Infants Bill

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