

The Women's Library

Hand Made Tales: Women and Domestic Crafts Study Day: 12&13 November 2020

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Teaching and Preserving crafts: The Women's Institute

Craft embedded in the constitution

The teaching and preserving of crafts is embedded in the constitution of the WI . The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) was formed in 1917 and the constitution adopted gave the main purpose of the National Federation as:

‘to provide an organisation with the object of enabling woman to take an effective part in rural life and development.’ It undertook to do this by providing ‘for the **fuller education of countrywomen** in citizenship, in public questions both national and international, in music, drama and other cultural subjects and also to secure instruction and training in all branches of agriculture, **handicrafts**, domestic science, health and social welfare.’

WI Industries

The very first WIs had opened in Britain in 1915 under the auspice of the Agricultural Organisations Society (AOS) and were funded by the Government via rural development money. The AOS encouraged co-operative ventures to help rural regeneration, so along side their efforts to grow more food to supply the war torn country many WIs started co-operative craft industries. In May 1918 NFWI was awarded a grant of £1,000 from the Carnegie Trust ‘for the purpose of initiating and assisting cottage industries through the WI’. A Trading Society was registered under the industrial and Provident Society Act WIs joining were able to order materials at wholesale prices and share the orders for goods made. Toy making was the first and then other crafts mentioned were cane, osier basket making and fur craft.

The grant enabled NFWI to employ Miss Preece as **technical organiser**. Her brief was to ensure adequate standards of work because:

- All public bodies are interested in the work of rural reconstruction
- Old established handicraft societies will challenge the standard of workmanship
- Industrial societies will criticise our economic basis

Sadly this venture to organise and sell WI members craft work through a central outlet was not a success and on 16th June 1919 The Industries Society was declared bankrupt and wound up. Although the society ceased many WIs continued to make and sell their craft work locally through local outlets.

Now, Miss Preece who was influenced by the Arts and Crafts movement changed the emphasis to helping the WI to revive traditional rural crafts. NFWI decided to concentrate on education. It was agreed that in future they would work...

Towards a revival of handicraft for home use rather than the development of trade industries. With this end in view it is proposed establishing a Guild of

*Learners which shall have as its object to improve the conditions of rural life by encouraging home and local industries.*ⁱ

The Guild of Learners of Home Craft was launched in February 1920 at a conference of WI County Handicraft Organisers in London. It was reported that

*The feeling of the meeting was firm upon the need for securing a good standard, the advantage of linking up those who wished to excel in handicrafts and the great ability of country women in this direction*ⁱⁱ

In due course NFWI received grant aid for this work from the Development Commission and Miss Preece continued to be employed, she explained:

*As distinct from industries, which were primarily connected with money-making, handicrafts had as their first essential enjoyment in the work for its own sake. In industry, capital, premises, and trade conditions had to be considered. In handicrafts we worked in our homes, supplied our own good material, instead of buying ready made, bad and expensive, and we revived the old crafts for which Englishwomen were once famous all over the world.*ⁱⁱⁱ

The Guild of Learners purpose was to regain the practice of:

- 1) Home handicrafts with a view to restoring the best traditions of English Workmanship
- 2) To assist in bringing the best instruction in handicrafts within the reach of villages.

The Membership was in two categories:

1. **Associates** – WI members who will undertake to become proficient in some handicraft connected with the home
2. **Members**
 - a) WI members who are already proficient in some handicraft
 - b) WI members who are proficient in some handicraft and are willing to use the knowledge for the furtherance of such craft in their neighbourhood

A series of **proficiency tests** were gradually introduced which a member had to complete before she could train as a demonstrator, instructor or judge. The first test was held in September 1920 and it was for glove making.

Once established the main services offered by the Guild centrally were:

- The Guild Library
- Loan collection of specimens of craft work
- Advice on technical points
- Schools for training of demonstrators, teachers and judges
- Administering tests

The first **national course** to be organised by the Handicraft sub-committee was a five day course in September 1920 at The Victoria and Albert Museum. The subject was

Decorative Stitchery and included lectures from V&A staff, visits to exhibits and the library.

The History of Ornament – Prof Newberry
Chinese symbolism
Dress embroidery for present time – Miss Drew
Embroideries seen in Czecho-Slovakia – Miss Drew
Banners – Commander Kettlewell
Handwork as the basis of civilisation – Miss Preece

The Guild of Learners first priority was to **train and appoint leaders** who would become the teachers, trainers and demonstrators for the WI members throughout the country.

One of the first **Schools** was held in November 1920 at the Technical Institute in Tunbridge Wells. 32 members attended this course which lasted 12 days. The students could select from: glove making, upholstery (they made pouffes), carpentry (bowls, trays, boxes and even a bookcase were produced) and fur craft “poor little bunny skins so nasty and fatty developed into wonderful fur gloves”^{iv}

‘Proficiency tests were organised in glove making, decorative stitching, basket work and rush work. For example:

Decorative stitching (also called embroidery) a candidate had to provide:

1. An article of wearing apparel for the child or grown up, such as embroidered frock, tunic, jumper, blouse etc.
2. A piece of embroidery for the home on linen
3. Optional

35 candidates, 23 passed, 10 failed, 2 disqualified.

Colour and design were criticised ‘some excellent stitchery was spoilt on poor designs

High standards were set, and these certificates were worth getting It was the beginning of the reputation reflected in the saying ‘...but is it up to WI standards?’^v

A report on first year of the Guild was given in July 1921, 209 members, 82 holding ‘A’ certificates for their craft and 7 the ‘B’ certificate as well.

Crafts;

34 Basket and rush workers; 86 glovemakers; 52 embroiderers; 16 upholsterers; 8 furcraft-workers; 6 weavers and spinners; 5 lace-makers; 7 Chair-caners; 4 toys-makers; 4 vegetable dyers; 3 book binders; 4 cobblers; 3 carpenters; 4 dressmakers; 3 knitters; 9 plain needle-workers; 1 potter; 1 slipper maker; 2 woodcarvers.

In 1921 it was decided to introduce two versions of the B certificate- 1st and 2nd class - acknowledging that different skills were required for **teaching** and **demonstrating**. A good teacher for a small class may not be good at giving a talk and demonstration to a large group. 1st class would be awarded to someone who could both teach and demonstrate.^{vi} A **Guild of Learners Badge** was introduced with a ribbon to hold the ‘bars’ for each proficiency certificate awarded (there are examples in the archives)

The qualified tutors travelled round the country teaching groups of WI members many of whom lived in remote villages and had never had access to adult education classes before. They were happy to display their work for group photographs

The residential schools

As well as classes NFWI organised intensive residential schools – for example in 1921- the ‘Dorset Pioneer Handicraft School’, lasted two weeks and offered tuition in, basket making, cane and rush seating, cobbling, chamois and fur glove making, thrift rugs, decorative stitchery, smocking, slipper making and upholstery. 120 ‘pupils took lessons and had to pass tests six months after having received instruction before they were finally accepted as instructors’ and 32 become teachers’.

Teaching crafts to all members

Local classes

Many of the WI trained teachers started to work for the local authorities and there was a demand for more WI teachers. In 1925 NFWI received a further grant to employ an assistant handicraft organiser to visit federations in order to check on the students who were trained, free, by the Guild of Learners and ensure that they ‘should furnish accurate yearly returns of their work’.

In 1927 NFWI received ‘a grant from the Development Commission for the handicraft department to train teachers – the education authorities in most counties being as yet unable to provide all that is required in that respect’. A block grant of £1,665 was given to provide grants to County Federations who ‘undertake to hold 5-day schools in a craft not previously taught in the area’. Reports of such schools include teaching embroidery, soft furnishing, upholstery, book-casing, cane-seating, eiderdown making, gloving, lace-making, linen embroidery, smocking, soft-toy making, tinkering. New crafts introduced included crochet and carpet mending.

Publications

For WI members who did not belong to the Guild of Learners *Home and Country* (the WI monthly magazine) carried a regular column and articles on Handicraft. In 1922 there was a series of articles - *Hints on embroidery* by Joan Drew and the first **paper patterns** were introduced that could be ordered from the magazine

There were also booklets and many simple and cheap leaflets produced by the NFWI publications department

Local Crafts

There was great interest in reviving local crafts: in Somerset and Norfolk rushwork, in Sussex smock making, in Dorset making covered buttons. An unusual one from Cumbria was making mats from bailer twine.

These were promoted not only locally but nationally often by printing leaflets or articles in *Home and Country*

Exhibitions

Another way of encouraging WI members to improve their craft work was by holding exhibitions where judges would award marks and give comments, these were intended to be positive and give pointers to the ways the work could be improved.

The first national exhibition had been held in 1918 and had been primarily for selling goods the profit being shared between the maker and NFWI. Banners were awarded for displays.

Many National Handicraft exhibitions followed increasing in size and importance. Staging and display became important and training was provided for that. To select the items to be shown at the national exhibitions Federations organised their own Handicraft Exhibitions from which the best items were selected

Table to show the national exhibitions held 1920 – 2000

Year	Venue	comment
1920	Caxton Hall	included craft work demonstrations, over £1000 earned by sellers
1921	Victoria and Albert Museum	small display of craft work by the Guild of Learners – no sales
1922	Victoria and Albert Museum	652 exhibits from 49 counties and 281 exhibits from individual Guild of learners. There were no sales, no competitions no prizes, its sole purpose was to display the best handwork the movement could produce
1924	The Drapers Hall	included for the first time a section for co-operative work and also a section for cottage furnishing.
1927	Indian Pavilion of the Imperial Institute	of the 1,822 exhibits that came from the counties only 983 were displayed. This was the first year that gold stars were awarded.
1929	the Imperial Institute South Kensington London and the City Art gallery in Leeds	the specially made Queen's quilt was given to Queen Mary. There were 1,786 entries, 1,061 were displayed and 45 gold stars awarded. It was estimated that 24,000 people saw the exhibition in one or other of its venues.
1932	New Horticultural Halls	County co-operative rooms were introduced and every county exhibited.
1935	New Horticultural Halls	25,000 people visited in the week it was open. Exhibits were selected from entries from 57 County Federations
1938	New Horticultural Halls	Ran for 8 days Admission members (wearing a badge) 1/6, none members 2/6 Arrangements made with the railway companies for visitors to the exhibition to make a one day

		visit to London for a single fare
1946	Leamington Spa	<i>Craftswomen at work</i> . It consisted of continuous practical demonstrations
1952	Victoria and Albert Museum	<i>Handicrafts in the home</i> . 41,500 visited. Centre piece was the wall hanging <i>Women in Wartime</i> now at the Imperial War Museum.
1960	Victoria and Albert Museum	The Country Year
1965	Ceylon Tea Centre	<i>The Countrywoman Today</i> a general exhibition including crafts to celebrate golden jubilee
1975	Commonwealth Institute	<i>Tomorrow's Heirlooms</i> 52,232 attended
2000	Tatton Park	Millennium Craft Spectacular

1930s and the Depression

In the 1930s with the support of a grant from The Development Commission NFWI could continue to employ a Handicrafts Organiser/Adviser. However funding was not as generous and no longer gave free tuition for lecturers and demonstrators and new **training was introduced for judges** and for those involved in **staging and design**

More emphasis was given to ways of supporting the craft tutors with such things as the loan collections which were enlarged and kept up to date; there were special collections for teachers of specific crafts to borrow as well as the general collections to be used to promote craft work. Federations also put together their **own loan collections**, and still do to this day.

In 1934 NFWI received a grant from the government 'to assist in the teaching of crafts in Occupational Centres for the unemployed' NFWI published a very popular booklet on Thrift crafts.

War time

During the Second World War, with materials in short supply, the Handicraft work concentrated on 'make do and mend', and a huge amount of knitting of socks and pullovers for the troops, prisoners of war, search light operators, refugees

Once the war was over the emphasis reverted once more to teaching and raising standards. A survey carried out in 1948 showed that the most popular classes in the WIs were: Dressmaking, Leather work, Basketry, Rugs, Gloves, Soft toys, Upholstery, Quilting, Embroidery.

Denman College – NFWI's own short stay residential college, Marcham near Oxford

The opening of the college in 1948 gave a whole new dimension to craft work. There were two types of course in the early years, 'A' courses open to any WI member, and 'B' course which were only open to members nominated by their Federation, and these were training courses many of which were in Craft subjects. From the beginning about a

quarter of the courses were craft. In the 1950s the popular 'Country Housewife' courses included some craft work, but there were also specialist craft subjects, e.g.

1951 Upholstery, Linen embroidery, the making of underclothes,

1952 Upholstery, soft furnishing, smocking, gloving, fabric printing, cross-stitch

1955 loose covers, lampshades, recovering eiderdowns, basketry, machine knitting, tatting

1956 sewing new fabrics, pottery, tailoring

At first the craft courses were taught in some renovated huts left by the war Ministry on the grounds. It was not until 1970 that the new teaching centre provided fully equipped craft rooms for 'soft' and 'hard' crafts.

Individual federations furnished the bedrooms and this resulted in some beautiful craft work – patchwork bedspreads etc

In the 1950s the 'Guild of Learners of handicrafts' change its name to The **Handicraft Guild** – but continued to administer Proficiency test - A B and C tests (C for teachers) The list of crafts now included **clothes renovation** and **machine work** and **mending** and **upholstery**.

In 1966 Correspondence courses were started by NFWI as a way of helping WI members to learn a new craft even if they were not able to find a local class. The first of these were: canvass work, patchwork, basketry and embroidery. The work could be sent to a tutor for comment and advice.

Design Award

Various craft advisers over the years had commented on the importance of design in craft work and finally in **1967** A new award for work having special merit by showing all round high standard of design was announced, to start in 1968. Called the **Design Award** it was initially given for any piece of craft work that had been entered for one of the Handicraft Guild tests. The first three were given in 1969 for crochet, tatting and rug making. In 1973 the procedures changed and items were submitted directly for the award.

End of the Guilds

The Handicraft Guild was abolished (along with the Produce Guild) in 1972. It was argued that the work of the two Guilds was central to the aims of the whole of organisation and every member should have access to this without further payment. It was replaced by the Home Economics department incorporating both areas of work.

In 1977 the **Home Economics Basic Certificates** replaced the 'proficiency tests. A modern syllabus was produced and the candidates had to submit for examination not only the required craft items but also a 'working notebooks'. In 1978 252 certificates were awarded and the Design award was given to 7 members from 39 entries.

It was not until 1977, with the formation of **WI Books Ltd** that a new era of publishing began. Proper hardback books, rather than pamphlets, were produced and aimed at the general public as well WI members, and with the aim not only of education but also of

making a profit for NFWI. WI Books ceased to trade as a separate company when it no longer was profitable at the end of the 1990s

Sponsorship

In the late 1970s, as grants from the Government were reduced, NFWI began to make links with commercial sponsors. In 1979 the Design award was run in association with the British Wool Marketing Board. The East Sussex member who won was able to see her design modelled on the cat walk at a fashion show.

Modern times

A third of the courses at Denman College continue to be in craft work although they reflect changing interests amongst members – there is an increase in ‘hobby crafts’ decoupage, encaustic art, quilling, covered boxes.

In the 1990s ‘**Action Packs**’ were developed. Devised by specialist craft advisers these packs enable a group to learn a skill without a tutor, following step by step instructions. **Travelling tutors** provided another way in which WIs could get tuition in some of the more specialist crafts where they might not find a class locally.

In the 1990s there was also a policy of seeking external **accreditation** for the qualifications offered through NFWI. Accreditation was sought through the Open College Network, which also enabled Denman College to access funding via a franchise with Abingdon College. In craft work in particular NFWI built up a relationship with City and Guilds. For example a City and Guilds certificates in embroidery and patchwork and quilting. NFWI also offers the C&G 7900 Creative Skills scheme. As with the qualifications through the Guild of Learners in the 1920s and 1930s it is only a small number of people who take these, but they are important as the teachers of the future.

In NFWI archives at the Women’s Library

Design Award 1968 – 1999

FWI/B/2/2/125

Crafts in the 1920

FWI/H/42

Original designs in craft work by members of WI 1972 pamphlets and notes

FWI/E/4/2/18

NFWI Loan Collection 1961-1981

FWI/E/4/2/20

Life and Leisure Community Quilts 1984

FWI/E/4/2/29 and 30

Status of Guilds 1925-1974

FWI/E/4/2/32

Guilds origin and cessation

FWI/E/4/2/34

Books on Handicrafts

FWI/G/1/3/3 & 3/1 Needlecraft

Thesis

Public Face and Private Space

The crafts in Britain between the wars – Thesis by Jacqueline Barber 1998
FWI/H/33

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ⁱ NFWI executive committee minutes of 9/12/1919

ⁱⁱ Home & Country March 1920

ⁱⁱⁱ H&C May 1920 p13

^{iv} Home and Country Jan 1921 p7

^v This was the title given to a dissertation written by Joanne Pearce for a History of Design BA, Brighton University in 1998

^{vi} H&C Nov 1921 p5