

## Countrywomen in war time - Women's Institutes 1938 – 1945

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### Introduction

Early in 1938, when war with Germany seemed imminent, the British Government realised that, just as in the First World War, countrywomen were going to have a special role to play on the home front.

Officials of the Ministry Agriculture made the first move by contacting Gertrude (Trudie), Lady Denman, who had been Chairman of the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) since 1917. The Women's Institute Movement in Britain started during the First World War with the support of the Women's Branch of the Board of Agriculture. Lady Denman had been the Honorary Assistant Director of the Women's Branch, with responsibility not only for forming Women's Institutes (WIs) but also for the Women's Land Army.

The Minister of Agriculture invited Lady Denman to become Director of the Women's Land Army. He invited her because of her past experience with the Land Army but no doubt he realised that through her he would have access to a vast network of countrywomen. Through the 1920s and 30s NFWI had developed into a large and successful women's movement with 5,546 individual Women's Institutes spread throughout England and Wales.<sup>1</sup>



Before making her decision Lady Denman consulted with the National Executive Committee (NEC) of NFWI. She felt that, in view of her previous experience, it was her duty to accept, provided that her acceptance did not damage the institutes. The NFWI executive committee agreed and urged her not to give up her chairmanship, so she became Director of the Women's Land Army and continued as Chairman of NFWI.

Drawing of Lady Denman in the Chair at the AGM (from Home and Country)

Having accepted the job as Director of the Women's Land Army, Lady Denman immediately began to work out detailed plans for a war time Land Army and to recruit women as chairmen of the county committees. She and Frances Farrer, NFWI's General Secretary, used their personal knowledge to draw up a list of suitable candidates. On May 14th Lady Denman wrote, in confidence, to all these

women asking if they would take on the job. <sup>2</sup> Many were already officers in their County Federations who would know a further network of women in the villages who could be called on to help.

Exactly what role the WI as an organisation should play if war started was now to be decided. Throughout the 1920s and 30s the organisation had been actively promoting the League of Nations, and in 1929 the annual meeting had passed a resolution that the movement *consider how best to further the cause of world peace*<sup>3</sup> In 1934 Nancy Tennant, an executive member, had spoken on behalf of NFWI at the Peace Demonstration in Brussels<sup>4</sup>. Not only had the organisation taken a strong anti-war stand but enshrined in the NFWI Constitution was the principle of non-sectarianism; it was out of respect for the beliefs of pacifist Quaker members that the NEC decided to impose restrictions upon the participation of WIs in war work.



Nancy Tennant in 1934

In June 1938 a letter was sent to all Institutes. It started with a statement about the newly founded Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) - about which more later - and then went on to explain that the NEC felt that the

*.....responsibility for defence against air raids lies with the local authorities and in the majority of cases the precautionary measures concern men and women equally. The work can, therefore, most fittingly be carried out in the villages by the Local Authority (Rural District Councils and Parish Councils) or be delegated to some other body*

*representing both men and women and all the village organisations.*<sup>5</sup>

However, the letter continued, it was appropriate for WIs to co-operate with caring for evacuees, but otherwise the important thing was to maintain the Institute meetings as normally as possible *...., thus providing for the members a centre of tranquillity and cheerfulness in a sadly troubled world.*<sup>6</sup>

## Evacuation

The WIs' involvement in evacuation began much sooner than anyone had imagined when that letter was written. In September 1938, during the Munich crisis, the Home Office turned to the NFWI. As Dame Frances Farrer was later to reflect, the official evacuation scheme had not been worked out, the tiny department dealing with it at the Home Office *....was so utterly swamped by evacuation enquiries that they accepted with deep gratitude the loan of a typist and a typewriter from NFWI.*<sup>7</sup>

The WVS, who would later deal with evacuation schemes, was still in embryo, and Frances Farrer recalled that:

*Lady Reading (the Chairman of WVS) sent me an SOS to help with personnel to organise the scheme locally. I was in the country but luckily had with me the key to no 39<sup>i</sup>. I rushed up to London in the car, obtained various papers from the office and then had a long sitting at WVS recommending people who might be roped in in each county to organise the evacuation scheme*

This meeting with Lady Reading took place on Sept 24th; and on Sept 26th NFWI wrote to all the County Federations in the areas to be covered by the evacuation, and formed a 'flying squad' of six existing WI Voluntary organisers to visit the liaison officers and the County Federations.

The next day the Home Office asked if NFWI could help evacuate children under five years of age as well. The official scheme had made no provision for these younger children, but the mothers were growing desperate when they realised that there were no gas masks for babies. In spite of all the difficulties NFWI agreed, and in the next couple of days improvised a scheme for despatch, transport and billeting of the younger children and babies.

When all had been set up the Home Office told NFWI to put all arrangements on hold, awaiting Neville Chamberlain's return from Munich. They were able to do this with one exception - 60 children from Bessborough Street, Westminster, had already been taken to Cambridge. The Prime Minister returned with the message '*I believe it is peace for our time*', and the children who had been taken to Cambridge were returned home.

This whole episode came to be known as 'The institute war week'. It had shown how an evacuation scheme could work and how willing the village WI members were to co-operate. One institute President explained that within a day of receiving the emergency letter her WI had *arranged a place for a crèche, and for helpers, and got the promise of many cots, mattresses and blankets. Board and lodging was found for 91 children. It was all done in a couple of hours.*<sup>8</sup>

NFWI had a reputation as a powerful lobbying organisation, so it is not surprising that they subsequently sent a Memorandum to both Sir John Anderson, Minister of Civilian Defence at the Home Office and to Mr Walter Eliot, Minister of Health, containing detailed practical suggestions on how in future evacuation procedures might be improved.<sup>9</sup>

### **Town children through country eyes**

It was another year before the WIs were again involved in evacuation. At the outbreak of war in September 1939 1.25 million children and mothers were evacuated from urban areas over a period of three days. On this occasion the

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<sup>i</sup> 39 Eccleston Street, Victoria, London, - the Headquarters of NFWI

WVS arranged transport and escorts to the country; once in the country many children and mothers were billeted on WI members.<sup>ii</sup>

The experience of evacuation often proved traumatic for both the children and their hosts. There were many reports of country people being shocked by the state of the children; many had head lice for example (which was perhaps partly because they were evacuated at the end of the school holiday and had not been inspected by the school nurse for several weeks). There were also reports of children who did not know how to use a knife and fork and whose preferred diet was chips. Equally the town children, and their mothers, were horrified by what they considered primitive conditions of some of the country houses where there was no piped water or electricity.

This first evacuation did not last for long; as soon as it became clear that the expected air raids had not happened, many of those who had been evacuated went back to the towns. Nevertheless NFWI felt that there was much to be learned from this experience, so in December 1939 they issued a questionnaire to every institute that had received evacuees asking for particulars



evacuees in village

of the children and adults received in that village. The accompanying letter said:

*The earlier reports as to the condition and habits of a small section of evacuees were of a distressing kind, but it is now being said that such reports were greatly exaggerated.*

*Your committee feels that it would be a constructive piece of work if the institutes can give an accurate picture of the condition of the mothers and children when they arrived in the villages. If this is done while the events are still clear in our minds it will be of great value to the authorities who are responsible for the social conditions and health education of the community.*

*Such a survey would not be undertaken in a spirit of grievance but as a definite contribution to the welfare of our fellow citizens*

Over 1,700 WIs completed this Evacuation Survey and the results were collated by NFWI. The results were first communicated to the Health and Education Authorities from which the children came.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>ii</sup> WIs were located in communities of less than 5,000 population, so it was only in these more rural areas that families were billeted with WI members.

The questionnaire did ask some rather leading questions: after the name and address of school and town from which children came, it asked if there were any children who suffered *from head lice, skin diseases, bedwetting or other similar insanitary habits*. Further questions asked about those who had mothers staying with their children included...*If there were any among the mothers who lacked the knowledge or will to train their children in good habits?*<sup>11</sup>

There was little understanding in 1939 of the links between bedwetting and stress, and many homes had bedding ruined for which there was no compensation. There was a clash of culture between the town and country women; the town women were appalled at earth closets and the countrywomen felt that the town women did not know how to cook a proper meal. There were some real problems revealed however and NFWI considered it was its duty to do something about it. As Maggie Andrews observes:

*The evacuation schemes resulted in many rural women feeling exploited and alienated by the Government actions, and the NFWI became one of the few areas in which they could express their views.*<sup>12</sup>

In September 1939 the National Council for Social Services (NCSS) held a conference to consider certain problems arising from evacuation. Following that they set up a *Women's Group on Problems arising from evacuation* which later changed its name to the *Women's' Group on Public Welfare* . Margaret Bondfield M. P.<sup>13</sup> was appointed as Chairman and serving under her were representatives of a number of the leading women's organisations, including NFWI and WVS. Their confidential report, *The Conditions of English Town life as Disclosed by Wartime Evacuation* was produced on Oct 8th 1941. In her introduction Margaret Bondfield, wrote:

*NFWI raised the question of the conditions of town life as disclosed by evacuation, and the need that improvement should be sought. Our committee was therefore set up, to explore the problems of manners and customs in the home which have been raised as the result of evacuation...*<sup>14</sup>.

The report, 120 pages long with 30 appendices, includes evidence from numerous witnesses including health visitors, housing managers, teachers, social workers and medical officers of health, and describes *"the conditions of extreme poverty that are generally quite unknown to the ordinary citizen ....."* The report concludes by listing the actions which the Government: is urged to take:

*To set up a "children's allowance"*

*To make nursery school places available for children of over 2 years old in slum areas*

*To keep young people at school until 16 with an "imaginative curriculum...closely related to their needs...."*<sup>15</sup>

NFWI continued to lobby the Government to implement these recommendations and at the AGM in 1943 WI delegates recorded their *appreciation of Sir William Beveridge's work for social security and particularly for his recognition that health insurance for housewives and children's allowances are essential if family life is to be free from want.*<sup>16</sup>

### **Looking forward to a better world**

In 1939 in the months leading up to the outbreak of war Lady Denman had said

*We believe that it is essential that Women's Institutes in their anxiety to help in a time of national crisis should not lose sight of their peacetime functions.....their efforts to improve country life should not cease.*<sup>17</sup>

She went on to outline some of those things that she felt were urgent

*..we all know that there are still villages without an adequate supply of water – there are schools which are a disgrace and which no city would put up with for a moment – there are houses which should have been re-conditioned or pulled down years ago, there are thousands of women who are suffering unnecessary pain in childbirth and there are children growing up without adequate milk. When I think of these evil things and when I read official reports which draw attention to them I feel there is not one of them which the united efforts of 328,000 women could not and should not cure.*<sup>18</sup>

Throughout the war NFWI remained true to its aim of helping to improve rural life, and continued to send its comments to Government on issues it felt important. After the Evacuee survey there were several other surveys conducted nationally: In 1942 evidence was collected for the Central Housing Advisory Committee's sub committee on the Design of Dwellings<sup>19</sup>; in 1943 Women's Institute Views on Education<sup>20</sup> were presented to government, and in that same year the decision was made to acquire a house and open a WI College.<sup>21</sup> In 1944 there was a detailed survey and report *Water and Sewerage*. In all of these the initiative came from NFWI but the Federations and WIs supported and provided the information

### **Countrywomen's special role**

In the Autumn of 1939 Lady Denman had promised the WIs news of the *important part that they were to play in the production and preservation of the*

*country's food*<sup>22</sup> . With up to two thirds of Britain's food being imported, the government realised that they had to find ways of producing more food at home.

Bottling and preserving surplus fruit and vegetables was something that countrywomen had always done. NFWI already gave considerable emphasis to practical cookery and there were trained Instructresses of Home Economy already at work in the Federations. In the early part of 1938 the Ministry of Agriculture had given NFWI an initial grant of £500 to set up a Produce Guild to teach members about intensive cultivation and to supply fertilisers and plants more cheaply. The grant allowed an Organiser to be employed to travel round the country running courses and giving advice. WI members were ready not only to grow more produce but also to start the co-operative enterprises for which they are probably best known – jam making, bottling and canning. The grant from the Ministry was increased, and by 1944 NFWI received £2,100 for national work and £4,000 for work in the County Federations.

The Government grant allowed NFWI to buy £1,400 worth of sugar in 1940 and distribute it round the Federations who in turn issued it to those WIs prepared to take part in the Co-operative Fruit Preservation Scheme. As a result 1,631 tons of preserves were made that year. Federations bought canning machines to loan to Institutes, and the Americans, through the Associated Countrywomen of the World, sent 500 Dixie Hand sealers (home canners) along with a complete



Preserves being labelled in  
a Preservation Centre

Food Preservation Unit and oil stoves, preserving pans, tea towels, thermometers, jam jars, bottling jars, jam pot covers and special discs for pickles and chutneys<sup>23</sup> .

The work was done in 'WI preservation centres', there were over 5,000 of these, located in private houses, farm kitchens, outbuildings, village halls or school kitchens. The centres only dealt with fruit which could not be used by its growers or transported to a jam factory and so was in danger of going to waste. There was no remuneration other than to cover running costs. After 1941, when rationing started, the scheme came directly under the Ministry of Food. Members then sold their fruit to the centre for a fixed government price, but the women worked voluntarily in the centre. The helpers were not allowed to buy anything for themselves, Ministry Inspectors visited the centres and all the jars and cans were collected and taken to central wholesale depots. Between 1940 and 1945 over 5,300 tons of fruit was preserved in this way and Sir Henry French, permanent secretary to the Ministry of Food, told a conference of 300 delegates from WI Preservation centres, that *the output of the last four years had been the equivalent to a year's jam ration for more than half a million people in this country*<sup>24</sup> .



The Queen visits a WI canning unit

### **Other ways by which the WIs helped the war effort**

Although Lady Denman saw the production of food and the care of evacuees as the most important work the WIs would do, as the war continued WIs kept being invited to join further schemes. Uncertain about what was or was not allowed as 'war work' WIs requested rulings from the NFWI. They were told that they could co-operate over the formation of village welfare committees, but they should not use WI funds to provide equipment for refugees. WIs owning their own halls were given guidelines about their use. A war time handicraft policy was agreed and WIs were told that they could set up mending parties for evacuee children's clothes, and make garments for the troops, but the materials were not to be bought out of WI funds, the money was to be raised by special effort. When, in Sept 1941, the Director of Voluntary Organisations suggested to NFWI that WI members might mend socks for the services the committee stated that they .....were of the opinion that if possible troops should be taught to do their own darning and mending so that they might be prepared for any eventuality<sup>25</sup>

In July 1940 NFWI launched a WI Ambulance Fund,<sup>26</sup> deciding that the organisation could support this cause but subsequently deciding against launching a fund to buy a WI Spitfire.





The WI ambulance is handed over- photo taken outside the London HQ in Eccleston St. On right Lady Denman and Dame Frances Farrer (Gen Sec), the staff are gathered on the left (overall seem to be the 'uniform')

In Sept 1943 the Ministry of Food appealed to women's voluntary organisations to help in the Food Advice Campaign, and along with the County Education Authority and the Rural Domestic Economy Instructresses, the WIs appointed food leaders in nearly every village. Often these were members who were active in the WI Produce Guild. NFWI published leaflets giving hints on how to make rations spread further and how to feed the family a balanced diet, *Home and Country* contained numerous articles and practical household hints.



Produce guild Instructress show how to cut up a pig

In 1940, concerned about the lack of citrus fruit and therefore the possible lack of vitamin C in the diet, the Ministry of Food and Supply called on women to collect rose hips from the hedgerows to be turned into rosehip syrup. Most WIs responded to this appeal; they collected and weighed the fruits which were taken to collecting depots and on to the Rose Hip Products Association. From time to time *Home and Country* recorded their efforts, for example in 1944 Knockholt WI in Kent was mentioned for picking 97 lbs.<sup>27</sup> The collection continued after the end of the war when syrup was also provided for European children.

The NFWI co-operated with the Vegetable Drugs Committee of the Ministry of Supply, and the County Federations with the County Herb Committees by collecting medicinal herbs such as foxglove seeds for digitalis; in 1944 Monks Risborough WI in Buckinghamshire recorded sending 9 sacks of belladonna stalks to Islip Herb Centre.<sup>28</sup>

Although at the outbreak of war NFWI had been prescriptive about what WIs could do as 'war work', by the end it was reported with pride that between 1939 and 1943 that WIs had done work for 11 government departments. This included not only all the work for the Home Office helping with evacuation, and for the Ministry of Agriculture in producing and preserving food, but also help with the Ministry's scheme for the repair of rubber boots for agricultural workers, making 2,500 potato baskets in response to a special appeal from the Ministry, and providing hospitality for the Women's Land Army, something specially requested by Lady Denman.



Making potato baskets



Other work included, for the Board of Education, providing school meals, particularly in small villages, and providing teachers for the "Domestic Front" campaign. For the Ministry of Food there was also the production and collection of culinary herbs and help with 'meat pie' scheme.<sup>29</sup>



For the Ministry of Health WI members made toys for refugees from Malta and Gibraltar and helped with the education work for diphtheria immunization and venereal disease campaigns. They also helped with the distribution of cod-liver oil and fruit juice.

One unusual area of work for the Board of Trade was described as: *Propaganda and instruction in connection with the Domestic Front and the use of rabbit skins to line coats for Russia.*<sup>30</sup> NFWI agreed to support Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia Fur Scheme, which was subsequently seen as more about gaining sympathy for the Russians as allies than actually providing clothing. WI members made coats, waistcoats, hoods and caps lined with rabbit fur for Russian women, members not only made the clothes but also reared the rabbits and cured the pelts. During two and half years of work 2,071 fur lined garments were sent to Russia via the Red Cross. Mrs Churchill came to the WIs Consultative Council in 1943 and admired examples of the work and some garments were also on display at an exhibition organised by the Society for Cultural Relations with USSR.



making fur coats for Russians

The other Government departments included in the list were: the Treasury – WI National Savings groups collected thousands of pounds; the War Office and Air Ministry – members had done welfare work for ATS (AA units) WAAFs and Home Guard; and the Ministry of Information for ‘Propaganda work ‘.

### **The local scene**

By reading the records of individual WIs it is possible to get a picture of how much or how little of what was going on at national level affected the local WIs. It is surprising that the war is only mentioned in passing in many of the minute books. One WI that did note the outbreak of war was Ringmer in Sussex, the secretary recorded:

*This was the first meeting since the beginning of the war and 45 members attended. The meeting commenced with the singing of ‘O God our help in ages past’.*<sup>31</sup>

At that meeting the letter from Lady Denman to all WIs was read, and those interested were invited to become members of the war time Produce Guild – *no entrance being charged during war time.*<sup>32</sup>

Ringmer had its allocation of evacuees. The billeting officer was a WI member, who also worked in the village post office. She was in an excellent position to know everyone and match children to hosts and, later, when this WI received the questionnaire about evacuees she was asked to help to complete it. Ringmer WI arranged for the Parish Room to be available on alternate Sundays for parents of evacuees.

*Some of the members were beginning to find these weekly visits a strain apart from that it would be a good chance for parents to meet and talk things over amongst themselves.*<sup>33</sup>

After about 6 months the coach for the evacuees' parents had discontinued running on Sundays so they decided that it was no longer necessary to offer this facility

Ringmer WI members played a very active part in the 'countrywomen's special role' of growing and preserving food. In 1940 they joined the fruit preservation scheme and ordered one cwt of sugar which was allocated to members in 6lb lots. At this time they made the jam in their own homes, but later, when Ringmer became one of the fruit preservation centres, they organised a communal 'jam factory' in the kitchen of the Parish Room. Canadian WIs sent packets of tomato and onion seeds which were distributed amongst the members. Members also collected rose hips, and in 1944 they joined the 'Meat pie scheme' making and distributing more than 200 pies each week

Knitting 'comforts' for the troops was on-going throughout the war, but, following the guidelines, they did not take the money for the materials out of the WI funds. Most of the money came from holding fortnightly whist drives, though on one occasion they agreed to forgo their refreshments at the meeting in order to buy wool, and later they used the money raised from the sale of scrap iron.

In March 1940 they received a letter from Ringmer soldiers thanking them for knitted comforts. In 1941 they reported 139 garments had been made for the troops, these were sent to a distribution centre with the exception of a pullover each for the Ringmer prisoners of war. As the war progressed they knitted for the Navy, Air Force and for the Home Guard. They also provided 'Occupational parcels' for prisoners of war, and in 1944 knitted shawls for European clothing relief. They had some sympathy with the NFWI opinion that soldiers ought to learn to darn their own socks because they made 50 'housewives' for the Pioneer Corps, collecting 7/- towards the cost.<sup>34</sup>

They did not respond to all requests, for example the request to provide tobacco for the troops was *passed over as the committee had decided not to take this up*<sup>35</sup>. They supported the NFWI appeal for the WI ambulance fund, sending £2.2.0, and in December 1941 the Christmas Whist drive proceeds of £8/14/6 were sent to Mrs Churchill for the Aid to Russia Fund.

In May 1940 they started a National Savings Group which continued throughout the war raising a total of £4,250. They also supported the village efforts towards the various national initiatives like *War Ships Week*, *War Weapons Week*, and *Salute the Soldier Week*.

At their monthly meetings they tried to carry on as usual and *provide some cheerful normality*, even if it was by imposing a '*sing, say, or pay*' penalty for the member who forgot to bring her gas mask. The programme included, talks on war time cookery, a Ministry of Information speaker on *Life under the present*

*difficult conditions*, and one from the Fire Guard of the Rural District Council on how to deal with the various types of incendiary bombs. There were also 'make do and mend' hints, for example a practical demonstration on how to re-foot a lisle stocking.

They responded to appeals from other bodies involved with the war effort, supplying helpers for the Red Cross Supply Depot. and volunteers to provide hot drinks and refreshments for ARP workers. One member became the local registrar for the Women's Land Army Emergency Corps, and there were several references to women who were evacuated to the village coming as visitors to WI meetings.

The WI continued some of its lobbying activity – they wrote to the Parish Council about the air raid shelters at the local School. They also read, on Sept 10 1941 a letter ..... *from Lady Denman regarding the urgent necessity of discussion and planning now the education of children after the war.* They sent their contribution to the various NFWI consultation papers on education, housing and water and sewerage. On March 14 1945 they recorded that they had *sent letters to the MP regarding Land Army Grants and help on return to civilian life for land girls, and also urging that children's allowances proposed in the Government scheme should be made out in favour of the Mother.*<sup>36</sup>

The records from this one WI demonstrate something of the degree to which the concerns of the NFWI were taken up at local level.

### **Competing for Countrywomen - the WVS.**

Earlier in this paper reference was made to the newly formed Women's Voluntary Service for Civil Defence (WVS)<sup>iii</sup>. In 1938, at the same time that the Ministry of Agriculture was recruiting Lady Denman, the Home Office was also thinking of ways in which women, urban and rural, could help in the war. Samuel Hoare, the Home Secretary, decided to set in place a system of Air Raid Precautions against anticipated attacks from the air, and possible gas attacks. He approached another well known woman with a proven track record, Stella, Dowager Marchioness of Reading. Lady Reading had been Chairman of the Personal Service League and he invited her to take on the leadership of the WVS, Lady Reading accepted the invitation immediately.

During May 1938, at the same time as Lady Denman was recruiting WI members to help with the Women's Land Army, the WVS was being set up. A Council was formed with Lady Reading in the Chair and on this were represented other women's voluntary organisations<sup>37</sup> but not the NFWI. The brief of this new organisation was:

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<sup>iii</sup> It was not until 1966 that the 'Royal' was added to the name and the organisation became the WRVS

*.....to provide a channel through which women could enrol in the Air Raid Precautions Services; bring home to every household in the country what air attack would mean; make known to every household what it could do for its own protection and to help the Community.<sup>38</sup>*

This organisation was to co-operate with Local Authorities and with other voluntary societies, although, as Susan Williams comments:

*...the WVS operated quite differently from other women's organisations with a tradition of voluntary service, such as Women's Institutes, Towns Women's Guilds or Women's Co-operative Guilds. Whereas the WI and the Guilds were organised in such a way as to meet the interests of their members, the WVS had been specifically created as a war time service to do what had to be done – even jobs that were unpleasant<sup>39</sup>*

NFWI were faced with a potential threat, this new organisation was going to recruit in both town and country. There would be women who would feel that they could not belong to both, and in a time of national emergency might decide that they should join the WVS and leave the WI.

The National Executive Committee tried to explain the relationship between the two organisations in a letter to the WIs:

*The National Federation is not represented on the Council of the W.V.S. but is in close touch with it, has promised to tell the Institutes about it, and has sent it the addresses of all County Secretaries. The two kinds of services which will most closely affect the villages are probably: (1) Evacuation services where by children or injured removed from the great centres of population may find provision and care in the comparative safety of the country. (2) Home Safety Services, i.e. the giving of mutual help between neighbours which will contribute to the maintenance of calmness and safety.*

*We, the NFWI Executive Committee, after careful thought, are of the opinion that Institutes as organisations could, if called upon to do so, give most valuable help in both these directions. Should the necessity arise, they could arrange hospitality for children and, as good neighbours, help each other in any time of danger.*

*For the other services, Institute members are giving help as individuals; but we consider that Air Raid Precautions – such as gas mask drill, fire fighting etc., should not be undertaken by the Women's Institutes as organisations.<sup>40</sup>*

The relationship between the newly founded WVS and the established NFWI was never an easy one. At local level however many country women belonged to both; the two organisations often worked together and badges were worn which indicated a WI member on WVS work. Meriel Withall, who was Assistant to the NFWI General Secretary at the time recalled later that while .....*the WVS worked alongside the WI during the war but there was always slight rivalry. Perhaps Lady Reading and Lady Denman were not exactly compatible*<sup>41</sup>

The declared NFWI policy led to some controversy and confusion. There were some WI members who left the organisation because they felt that it should have been playing a more active role in the war, and there were others who kept asking for guidance about what they could and couldn't do. To help to dispel some uncertainty Lady Denman and her fellow officers wrote to all WIs on 3rd October 1939

*. Our movement was built up in the last war, and the government has been quick to realize how useful it can be to them in this.*

She went on to encourage members to get involved in welfare work

*A mistaken impression has grown up that it is only WVS which may organise such welfare work for evacuees – this in not the case (as the HQ of WVS have agreed).....*<sup>42</sup>

Both WVS and NFWI were members of Margaret Bondfield's *Women's' Group on Public Welfare* but it was NFWI that first raised the question of the conditions of town life as disclosed by evacuation. Surveys had also been carried out by The Fabian Society and the WVS but it was the survey by NFWI that produced the most detail, as it was WI members who had the children living in their homes:.

*.....This intimate contact gave WI members an insight into the conditions of life of many town families; they found that a large number of their guests were without a decent home, and also without knowledge of how to manage one; they found what were the effects of this on the children, this experience went so deep that most WIs welcomed the opportunity offered by the survey to put on record the facts they knew and their conviction that the nation must not allow this state of things to persist.*<sup>43</sup>

In January 1940 it was reported to the NFWI executive committee that the WVS *regretted that the Federation had not more closely consulted with the WVS about the survey before issuing the questionnaire.*<sup>44</sup>

At this point the difference between the two organisations showed up very clearly. WVS as a service organisation did not approve of the questionnaire, whilst NFWI, as a campaigning and educational organisation, placed considerable importance on



ensuring that their views were heard, and that those views were based on member's opinions.

In reply to the complaint from the WVS the NFWI executive minutes record:

*That it was made clear to WVS Head Quarters*

*i That the committee could not agree that there was any side of social work which could be ruled as outside the consideration of NFWI Education and Federation Support Committee*

*ii. That in view of the permanent character of the WI movement the issuing of such a survey formed part of the routine work of NFWI Education and Federation Support Committee*

*iii. That only through an organisation of the character of the NFWI could the required information be obtained*

*iv. That the committee had no intention of departing from its standpoint.<sup>45</sup>*

Although the two organisations gradually came to realise that they had their own particular skills (e.g. the WVS accepted that food preservation was traditional WI ground) it was an uneasy truce. This was pinpointed by concern over membership. There had been a decrease in WI members quite naturally once the war began, the younger members were joining the services and certainly some left the WI to join the WVS which was recruiting rapidly – 32,329 women had joined by the end of 1938.

### **WI membership during the war years**

1938	328,000
1939	331,600
1940	291,000
1943	288,000
1944	288,300
1945	300,000
1946	305,000

In the minutes of the NFWI National Executive committee of 9 Nov 1939 it is recorded that the Buckinghamshire Federation complained that

*.....the WVS county organiser was anxious to enrol WI members as WVS members and depreciating this arrangement as unnecessary. Arising on this some committee members gave evidence that WVS was now undertaking enrolment of members on a large scale and Mrs Hitchcock stated that local newspapers had even spoken of WVS branches<sup>46</sup>*

After discussion they agreed that a letter should be sent to Lady Reading forwarding these reports .....and asking for her re-assurance that WVS was

*not setting up to be a new national organisation on a membership basis which might in any way compete with existing peacetime organisations*<sup>47</sup>.

The letter was never sent, and this minute was rescinded at the next meeting; perhaps Lady Denman felt that it might have caused a further deterioration in the relationship. This relationship was not improved by the 'headhunting' of Mrs Lindsey Huxley, a member of the NEC and a past Treasurer. She was recruited by Lady Reading to be Chief Regional Administrator to the WVS HQ staff at the Home Office. She accepted the post partly because Lady Reading had given her an undertaking that the WVS would not continue after the war. At first she tried to do both jobs but at the end of 1939 she sent a letter of resignation in which she ..... *explained that her work with WVS now claimed too much of her time to permit her to continue as a member of NFWI.*<sup>48</sup>

The WI continued to be irritated by WVS actions, taking offence at what appear to quite small things, for example in January 1940 *Mrs Lea drew the attention of the committee to a rhyme containing an ironical reference to WIs in a recent number of the WVS bulletin.* On this occasion the executive committee decided not to take any action but they were clearly annoyed.

As the war progressed the boundaries of work between NFWI and the WVS became clearer, however there was still concern about WVS 'poaching' WI members. The WI membership continued to decrease and on 14 December 1944 the National Executive's attention was drawn to an article in a Norfolk newspaper which referred to the WI movement being 'dwarfed' by the widespread activities of WVS. The committee agreed to seek an interview with the Home Office *to find out the Government's intention with regard to the future of WVS, and how long the Federation was expected to consider itself as a part of that organisation.*<sup>49</sup> The interview took place with Mr Kirwan in January 1945 by which time it was clear that the WVS was not going to be disbanded, although it was not until September that the Home Office announced that the WVS would continue for "possibly two years more"<sup>50</sup>

Lady Reading certainly saw a future for the WVS in the post war world, so the two organisations continued to exist side by side, the WI predominately in the rural areas<sup>iv</sup> and the WVS in the towns.

### **After the end of the war**

Once the war was over, and the WI had returned to its more normal activities of providing education for countrywomen and working to improve the conditions of rural life, it ceased to feel it was being dominated by the WVS. The WIs started to increase once more and soon overtook the pre-war numbers.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> At this time, according to WI rules, WIs could only be formed in communities with a population of less than 4,000. This rule was not rescinded until 1965

In 1946 The WI decided to commemorate the war by producing a huge piece of needlework, referred to in the early stages of planning as 'a modern Bayeaux tapestry', celebrating *The Work of Women in War time*<sup>52</sup> In this they were able to ignore divisions and perceived threats and depict the whole range of different ways in which all women, NFWI and WVS, had played their part.

Three large central panels show women working on the land, in industry and in the services; and 18 medallions round the sides illustrate women in many different roles, some of these would have been familiar to many WI members - queuing for food; a WI Fruit preservation centre, and looking after evacuees, but also shown are women doing ARP and WVS work, women railway porters, post women, clippies and police women, women making camouflage, running rest centres and canteens, land girls and nurses.<sup>53</sup>

After being exhibited at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1952, and then touring Britain and Australia, this wall hanging was given to the Imperial War Museum where it provides a lasting memorial to not only countrywomen but all women in wartime.

## **Conclusion**

The WI movement in Britain was born out of the First World War, sponsored by the government to help with the food supply. However during the interwar years it developed as an independent women's organisation with its own distinctive aims of empowering countrywomen and improving the conditions of rural life.

With the approach of the Second World War the organisation was faced with an important decision about what part it would play in that war. By deciding to impose close restrictions upon the participation of Institutes in war work, NFWI evoked criticism both within and without the movement which led to some conflicts of interest with the newly formed WVS. But by not involving itself closely with such matters as civil defence NFWI was able to continue to pursue its own aims and, in dialogue with the government, ensure that the views of countrywomen were heard in the preparations for reconstruction. Thus the WI movement was able to take an active part in national planning for post war Britain which probably had a longer standing effect than if it had submerged itself more in practical war work.

AS

1 September 2003

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## End notes

*Most of the NFWI archives have been deposited at the Women's Library and are currently in the process of being catalogued, so detailed references cannot yet be given.*

*Home and Country has been published every month since 1919 and copies are deposited at the Women's Library, there is also a full set at Denman College.*

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<sup>1</sup> Figures for March 1938: from the NFWI Magazine *Home and Country*, p.113, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>2</sup> GH p.151-2

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<sup>3</sup> *Speaking out – a public affairs handbook*, (list of mandates from AGMs of NFWI) published NFWI p 53

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Tennant, *In Defence of Peace, report of the NFWI delegate to the International Congress* ; Home and Country, April 1934, p.187, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>5</sup> Letter sent to all WIs and also published in *Home and Country*, July 1938, p.283, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Note from Dame Frances Farrer - Gen Sec NFWI (handwritten in a file on evacuation NFWI archives, Women's Library)

<sup>8</sup> *Home and Country*, November 1938, p.451, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>9</sup> Copies of these memoranda are in the Evacuation file in the NFWI archives at the Women's Library

<sup>10</sup> There are some details of the survey and letters from School Medical Officers in the NFWI archives at the Women's Library. In 1941 NFWI published a report based on the evacuation survey as a booklet entitled *Town Children through Country Eyes* copy in NFWI archives at the Women's Library

<sup>11</sup> Questionnaire about experiences of evacuees sent to all relevant WIs. In the NFWI Archives at the Women's Library - wartime file.

<sup>12</sup> MA p.112

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Bondfield was Labour MP, first woman chair of TUC and Minister of Labour from 1929, she was chair of the Women's Group on public welfare from 1939 – 1949

<sup>14</sup> *The conditions of English Town life as disclosed by wartime evacuation* report in NFWI archives at Women's Library war time files.

<sup>15</sup> - Ibid, also *Our Towns, a close up, a study made during 1939 – 1942* with a preface by Rt. Hon. Margaret Bondfield, J.P.,LL.D., Oxford University Press, 1943

<sup>16</sup> *Speaking Out* - a public affairs handbook, published NFWI p. 53  
The NFWI has continued to press for the family allowance to be paid to the mother, in cash, available through Post Offices.

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<sup>17</sup> Lady Denman's Chairman's address at the June 7 1939, AGM, verbatim report, NFWI archives Women's Library

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Evidence for the Central Housing Advisory Committee's Sub-Committee on the Design of Dwellings, October 1942, ENV.29, NFWI archives Women's Library

<sup>20</sup> Women's Institutes Views on Education, August 1943, NFWI archives Women's Library

<sup>21</sup> Denman College was finally opened in 1948. For details see AS chapter 6

<sup>22</sup> Letter dated 3 October 1939 and sent to all WIs, signed by G. Denman, Chairman; G. Hadow – vice chairman; Audrey Worsley-Taylor, Vice Chairman; Hilda Chamberlain (sister of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain), Treasurer. Copy in NFWI Archives, Evacuation file, The Women's Library

<sup>23</sup> IJ, p. 115

<sup>24</sup> *Home and Country*, June 1945, p.84, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>25</sup> NFWI executive committee minutes Sept 1941 – NFWI archive at Women's Library

<sup>26</sup> NFWI raised enough money to buy four ambulances and three radiology units, IJ p77

<sup>27</sup> *Home and Country*, January 1945, p.9, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Pie centres were set up in villages and the pies made could be sold without ration tickets. Materials for them were issued from Government stocks, this scheme was run jointly with WVS.  
WL p.39

<sup>30</sup> This report from NFWI was circulated to Federations listing what the WI did nationally between 1939 and 1945 for 11 government departments. NFWI Archives Women's Library.

<sup>31</sup> Ringmer WI minutes of 11 October 1939; East Sussex County Record Office WI 102/1/3

<sup>32</sup> Ibid

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid

<sup>34</sup> Ringmer WI, Minutes June 12 1940, East Sussex County Record Office, WI 102/1/3

<sup>35</sup> Ringmer WI minutes, March 13 1940, East Sussex County Record Office, WI 102/1/3

<sup>36</sup> Ringmer WI Minutes March 14 1945, East Sussex County Record Office, WI 102/1/4

<sup>37</sup> WVS Council included representatives of the National Council of Women, the Family Endowment Society, the Women's Engineering Society and the National Society for Equal Citizenship.

<sup>38</sup> SW p.159

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p.163

<sup>40</sup> Letter sent to all WIs and also published in *Home and Country*, July 1938, p.283, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>41</sup> PD p.81

<sup>42</sup> Letter dated 3 October 1939 and sent to all WIs, signed by NFWI Officers. Copy in NFWI Archives, Evacuation file, The Women's Library

<sup>43</sup> Introduction to the NFWI evacuation report, NFWI archives, The Women's Library

<sup>44</sup> NFWI executive committee minutes of January 10 1940, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>45</sup> NFWI executive minutes 14 Feb 1940, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>46</sup> NFWI National Executive minutes 9 November 1939, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Minutes of NFWI executive committee 14 December 1944, NFWI Archives, The Women's Library

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<sup>50</sup> , ' but government records reveal that other members of the WI were not happy with the continuation of the WVS. This was not surprising, as the WI had largely sunk their identity in order to help the other organisation with its war work.' P178 see correspondence in PRO, HO 356/2

<sup>51</sup> There were 5,611 WIs in 1938 and by 1951 there were 7,710.

<sup>52</sup> The hanging was on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1952 as part of an NFWI Exhibition of handicraft. After the close of the exhibition the wall hanging travelled to 18 counties, to Edinburgh for a meeting of the Scottish Rural Institutes and to Australia, to the Countrywomen of Australia. Finally it was deposited at the Imperial war Museum in 1955.

It was displayed for a while but then in the early 1970s it was taken to the Imperial War Museum store at Duxford near Cambridge. It was put on display again in the early 1990s for an exhibition but it has now been returned to store at Duxford.

<sup>53</sup> The completed hanging measures 15ft 3in by 9ft. and took over 400 embroiders 4 years to complete. The design was by Sybil Blunt

Anne Stamper  
1 September 2003

PS  
**War Charities Act 1940 - WIs had to apply for exemption so that they could raise money for various aspects of the war effort**  
**See H&CFeb 1941 SE Supp.**