

The WI as a women's only organisation

In 1897 the first Women's Institute was founded by a group of farmer's wives in Canada. Their husbands already met together at the Farmer's Institute to learn about improving farming methods and their wives decided that some similar organisation would be useful to them. *The Women's Section of the Farmer's Institute* (rapidly shortened to WI) was to provide the opportunity for women, who had previously lived very isolated lives, to meet together on a regular basis and to learn more about domestic science. The movement spread encouraged by the Provincial Governments who recognised its great social, educational and economic value.

Although the plea had been made (first in a book published in 1904, and, again in 1912 in a Report to the Board of Education) that WIs on the Canadian model should start in Britain there was no interest until the First World War. Madge Watt, who had been a founder member of the first WI formed in British Columbia and then became involved with forming other WIs, came to live in Britain and tried to get WIs formed. In February 1915 she addressed a conference in London on the subject of agricultural co-operation stressing the important role country women could play in growing more food to support the war effort. The result was the opening, in September 1915, of the first Women's Institute in Britain at the Anglesey village of Llanfairpwll; their programme concentrated on food production.

The rural communities were emerging from the long period of decline and there was a world war; submarine blockades stopped the import of food from overseas and home farms assumed a new importance. At the same time, the women's suffrage movement was making everyone, including women, evaluate the role of women and their position in society.

In 1917, the recently formed Women's branch of the Board of Agriculture's Food Department, set up to oversee the Women's Land Army, also assumed responsibility for setting up WIs. This did seem to be logical step, as a later history recalled:

"The challenge to help with the war effort by doing all they could to produce food proved an ideal way of getting women involved and organised. The government could recognise the value of an organisation that would harness the energies of the women to help to feed the nation."

The National Federation of Women's Institutes was set up with Lady Denman as Chair in 1915, and she was determined that the WIs should not be controlled by a ministry or a local authority. She negotiated an arrangement whereby the formation of WIs should be undertaken by the Food Production Department, but after that they should become the responsibility of NFWI – i.e. WIs would lay down policy and make their own rules at the AGM.

At the end of the First World War, in 1918, there were 700 WIs and by the end of 1919, there were 1,405; country women had a new confidence. During the war, with the men away they had demonstrated their ability to cope, and now finally women had received the vote, even though at this stage it had only been granted to those over 30 years old. Belonging to this new organisation had also given women increased freedom and the chance to meet others socially and across class boundaries - they had no intention of giving up the WI, they just needed to change the emphasis of their activities to adapt to post-war life.

The leaders had expressed their view of the future for the organisation in a pamphlet: *Women's Institutes and their part in the reconstruction of rural life* published by NFWI in 1917.

It has been long felt by those who have given thought to the problems of rural renewal in this country, and who recognise that the maintenance and development of the Agriculture industry depend on improved social and economic conditions, that fuller co-operation of women is necessary for the complete success of such renewal.

The WI is.....encouraging women to take a larger share and interest in the life and work of the community.....it has developed the business abilities of members.....the general importance of the Institutes is their educational value.

The success of an institute must depend on the inclusion of women of all ranks in its scope. Their aim of mutual help and combined effort can only be achieved by a better understanding of each other's needs and interests and the points of view from which these are regarded

The WI movement is not a war emergency measure but will be of permanent value in the world of rural regeneration

Many of the early leaders of the WI had been active in the women's suffrage movement and to them an important part of the new organisation was to encourage the fuller participation of women in public life. It may be that the WI tended to play down any suggestion of a connection with the suffragettes because the latter had in many eyes damaged their cause by the use of violent methods, yet the WIs were in some sense the rural counterpart of the banding together of women in the urban areas for the common fight for freedom and independence of both thought and action.

WIs taught citizenship that was demonstrated in very practical ways in villages, and they also celebrating individual women's successes. However, they were wary of 'politics' and struggled to define the exact boundaries of party politics beyond which they should not stray. The exploration of the new freedoms came slowly.

It was important that the WI remained a women's organisation; it was a training ground for women who had never taken part in public life to gain those skills. Briefly in the early 1920s there was a move to get the WI to amalgamate with the Village Clubs Association, which ran mixed clubs in villages. Both organisations had an interest in getting and maintaining village halls and both received funding from the Rural Development Commission, but a resolution at the AGM was roundly defeated; it was considered that the men would 'take over'. WI members wished to be free to run their own organisation and campaign on issues relevant to them as women, extending from maternity welfare in rural areas to equal pay for equal jobs, from provision of free family planning to the current campaign about violence against women and legal aid. The WI has continued to be a single sex organisation even though it has now extended beyond 'countrywomen' (the rule on no WI formed in a place with a population of over 4,000 was rescinded in the 1960s).

The WI's role to provide for the educational and social needs of members and to campaign on issue relevant to them is still true today. In that respect the WI remains a broadly feminist movement.

Since its establishment in 1915, the main purposes of the Women's Institute organisation are to enable women who are interested in issues associated with rural life, including arts, crafts and sciences, to improve and develop conditions of rural life, to advance their education in citizenship, in public questions both national and international, in music, drama and other cultural subjects and in all branches of agriculture, handicrafts, home economics, health and social welfare. The organisation seeks to give all women the opportunity of working together through the Women's Institute organisation, and of putting into practice those ideals for which it stands.

The WI is open for membership only to women based upon these charitable objects; namely the advancement of the education of women, which are stated in the WI's constitution. The Constitution and Rules are very specific and rule 9 states: "Membership of the WI is open to women. They may join by paying the required annual subscription..." This can, of course, be changed, but only if the members choose to do so by changing the Constitution.

Whilst WI membership is only open to women, men are welcome to attend courses at our residential adult education centre, Denman College, and take part in many activities, events and campaigns both locally and nationally. The Women's Institute is an educational charity with a constitution that states membership is only open to women. Under UK law charitable organisations whose constitution stipulates single sex membership are entitled to restrict access to the opposite sex.

As an aside, there are several men working for the WI because they were the best people for the job in the recruitment process. There is a distinction between the rules governing membership of the WI and employment law; when selecting staff it is important to make sure that employers select the right personnel regardless of their sex.