

## ***Becoming Active citizens***

Social action of the Women's Institutes in England and Wales – 1915 -1925

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### **Introduction**

'Citizenship' is once again fashionable. It appears regularly in ministerial speeches and must be taught as part of the National Curriculum. Promoting, recognising and valuing active citizenship however has long been the concern of adult and community educators who are keen to see ordinary people more in control of their own lives and actively engaged in shaping them.

This study explores the way in which women living in the rural areas of Britain in the first part of the twentieth century learned active citizenship through joining together in a voluntary organisation.

### **Rural Britain in decline**

In the first decades of the century life was hard for many of the people who lived in the rural areas of Britain. There had been a long period of agricultural decline and over two million acres of arable land had gone out of production. As many farmers went bankrupt unemployment increased among agricultural workers. In 1901 the farmers had sought to help themselves by forming the Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS). Nugent Harris, a former secretary of the AOS, wrote:

*For many years ...I tried to get the farmer members of the cooperative agricultural societies that I was organising to allow women to become members and failed. Then I got two or three to yield. Several women joined, but we could never get them to say a word at the meeting. After the meetings were over the women would come to me and criticise the decisions or some items on the agenda in which they were interested. I asked them why they did not say their say at the meeting. They replied "We dare not because our husbands and sons would make fun of us". (Robertson Scott, 1925, p22.)*

In 1904 Edwin Pratt, a rural historian, praised the work of the AOS but felt that it could do more to educate countrywomen and to bring fresh interest to village life and relieve '*what must too often be its unspeakable dullness*'. He went on to praise an organisation which had been set up in Canada – The Women's Institutes (WI). (Dudgeon, 1989, p11)

The WI movement was started in 1897 by a group of farmer's wives and daughters in Ontario. They had seen how the Farmer's Institutes provided the opportunity for the men to meet together and to learn about the latest methods in agriculture, and they founded Women's Institutes to provide a similar opportunity for women to meet together to learn more about how to care for their children better, and how to do their jobs on the farm more efficiently. The movement spread throughout Canada, encouraged by the Provincial Governments who recognised its great social, educational and economic value and WIs were soon formed in Belgium, Poland and

the USA.

Britain was slow to follow. It was not until February 1915, in the middle of the First World War, that the first WI was formed with the intention of 'mobilising' countrywomen to help produce food,. The catalyst was Madge Watt, who had been actively involved in forming WIs in Canada. On a visit to England she met Nugent Harris and found in him a fellow enthusiast. Together they persuaded the AOS to appoint her to the staff in order to start WIs. The first one she formed, in September 1915, was in the Anglesey village of Llanfairpwll <sup>1</sup>. This somewhat surprising venue was the home village of Colonel the Hon. Stapleton Cotton one of the Governors of the AOS, and Chairman of the North Wales branch. He was encouraging and felt that his village would be a good place to try out the new venture - Mrs Stapleton Cotton became the WI's first President <sup>2</sup>

The new WI adopted rules based on the Canadian model and agreed that they would:

- a) study home economics
- b) provide a centre for educational and social intercourse and for all local activities
- c) encourage home and local industries
- d) develop co-operative enterprises
- e) stimulate interest in the agriculture industry

The membership fee was two shillings<sup>3</sup>. It was stressed that the WI would be non-sectarian and non-party political and that the women who joined should be asking '*how can I help to better the lot of the whole community?*' (Robertson Scott , 1925, p37)

By the end of 1915 eleven more WIs had been formed initially in Wales but soon in England also. The time was right for this new movement for women, with its joint aims of education and social action, to expand rapidly throughout the country. Three things had come together to make the time right:

- Rural communities were emerging from the long period of decline, and women had a part to play
- There were serious food shortages caused by the war, and women could help with food production
- The women's suffrage movement was making people, including women themselves, re-evaluate the role of women and their position in society.

## **WIs in war time**

Initially the potential for helping the war effort by producing food was often what initially attracted women to join a WI. In November 1915, for example, a meeting was held in Singleton in West Sussex under the auspices of the Parish Council and the War Agricultural Committee Madge Watt was one of the advertised speakers. The posters specially invited to the meeting '*Holders of cottage gardens and Village allotments*', and Madge Watt said that she was addressing her talk on '*The Study of*

*Home Economics' 'particularly to the Guardians of the household.'* ( Anderson, edit., 1975 p60)

Twelve of the women so addressed were interested enough to meet again with Mrs Watt and form Singleton WI. Increasing numbers of WIs were started in England and Wales<sup>4</sup> until, by the beginning of 1917, there were 140 institutes. At this time the responsibility for forming new WIs was transferred to the recently formed Women's branch of the Food Production Department of the Board of Agriculture and the formidable Lady Denman, daughter of Weetman Pearson the oil magnate and newspaper baron, was appointed Chairman of a WI Committee.

Lady Denman was determined that the WIs, once formed, should be independent, and negotiated an arrangement whereby WIs, once formed by the Food Production Department, would become the responsibility of a National Federation of Women's Institutes(NFWI) - i.e. the WIs would lay down policy and make their own rules at an Annual General Meeting. 30 years later Lady Denman said:

*I didn't know much about Government departments in those days, but I was convinced that countrywomen were overlooked by authorities and that unless they got together to put their case this unhappy state of things would continue. The 140 Institutes scattered through England and Wales were not then a Federation - a few of us had been discussing the need for a proper constitution, but how was I to convince a Government Department that if these village societies were to be controlled by a Ministry or by Local Authorities their value would be nil ? (Huxley, 1961, p.70)*

## **Founding of the National Federation of WIs**

In October 1917, at a conference in Central Hall Westminster, delegates from the existing WIs agreed the Constitution and the N FWI was set up. It was clear that, at least for the time being, the priority would be helping to feed the nation, as the following speech made at that meeting by Miss Meriel Talbot, Director of the Women's branch of the Food Production Department shows:

*We have to prevent hunger - every ounce of food which can be grown in this country must be grown, and every woman who can give a hand in this vastly important work must give a hand"* (verbatim report, 16 October 1917)

The minute books of the early WIs show how they met this challenge. For example Glynde WI (formed in November 1917) had demonstrations on pruning fruit trees and the use of a hay box at their first meeting, and subsequently heard lectures on allotment gardening . The members of this WI were obviously doing their bit for the food supply as the records show that not only was the 'September meeting' *dropped because it was harvest time and members were busy on the land'*. But also *'owing to rationing of food it was decided to abandon buns and cakes at the tea'* (minutes, 13.12.1917; 2.2.1918; 2.5.1918)

Making jams and preserves and bottling and pickling were something that was second nature to most countrywomen and was very necessary if the excess produce

from gardens and small holdings was to be preserved. Many of the WIs set up and ran fruit bottling centres some of them using fruit sterilising outfits imported from USA by the AOS. Canning and bottling did not require sugar, but for jam making in 1917, 1918 and 1919 the Board of Agriculture made special allocations of sugar to WIs for fruit preserving.

The Constitution of NFWI included among its objects '*to encourage home and local industries*'. (minutes, AGM 16 October 1919). By this time there were numerous successful local WI industries already in existence making soft toys, rugs, baskets, dyeing and weaving fabrics, knitting socks and stockings, gloving, and making carved wooden toys. Through these 'industries' it was possible to revive some of the declining rural crafts and, at the same time, provide additional income and potential employment in villages for women and girls

One way devised for dealing with the surplus foodstuffs grown by members was to sell it through a market stall. The very first market stall was set up by Criccieth WI in 1915. It was so successful that it became necessary to employ paid help and the market stall became independent of the WI and was run as a co-operative trading company. In its peak year it paid over £7,000 to share-holder members. After the war it closed down, but a similar market stall was started in Lewes in 1919 where produce from 23 nearby WIs was sold as well as produce from the local small holdings run by ex service men.<sup>5</sup>

Communal purchasing allowed groups of people to benefit from reduced prices available for bulk purchase. For example Branstone WI communally purchased fish and coal. In 1918 they sold 1,525 lbs of fish in 6 months and distributed 22 tons of coal during the autumn. Through initiatives like these the WIs were able to '*better the lot of the whole community*'. The Minister of Agriculture, acknowledged this when he claimed that in his own experience Institutes were a '*most valuable adjunct to village life ...and brought together women who had never been brought together before*' he went on to say that in his village the local WI planned '*taking over a cottage in which the women could do their washing and a woman in the parish - a former laundry maid at my house is going to teach them*'. (Robertson Scott, 1925, p92)

## **Post war – 1918**

*The WI movement is not a war emergency measure but will be of permanent value in the world of rural regeneration. (WIs - their part in the Reconstruction of Rural Life, 1917)*

At the end of the war there were 773 WIs with 12,007 members. As the country moved into post war times not only did the women of the rural areas need the WI, the rural areas needed the WI to play its part in reconstruction. A survey carried out by NFWI at the end of the war had shown that in 156 cases out of 229 the WI was the only agency in the village doing social work. (minutes NFWI executive committee 8.4.1919)

Country women had a new confidence. During the war, with the men away, they had demonstrated their ability to cope, and now on December 28th 1918 women had

finally gained 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.

Some members may not have realised the potential for WIs in peacetime but the leaders certainly did. Many of them had been active in the women's suffrage movement and they now saw that this new movement could educate and encourage women to take up their new roles and responsibilities. Grace Hadow was the Vice Chairman of NFWI. Before the war she had been a tutor at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford and an active suffragist, during the war she was head of Welfare Department at the Ministry of Munitions and later would become Principal of the Oxford Home students Society (later St Anne's College). In 1918 she 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.(Hadow, 1918)*

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 for the leaders as well. *'I have never been in any movement, except the suffrage, to compare with the return it gives'*. (Robertson Scott, 1925, p.187)

At the AGM in October 1919 there was a debate about changes needed to the constitution now that the war was over. One suggestion was:

*That the NFWI be urged to consider the advisability of bringing men of the villages into the Institute movement (Minutes, AGM 15/16 October 1919)*

There were some vehement speakers against this proposal, one said that the WI is *'....practically the first opportunity that women have ever had of showing what they can do to prove their interest and to help our country...'* and another added that if

men were brought into the institutes they would take over and the women would not get a chance. The resolution was lost. (Verbatim report, AGM, 15/16 Oct 1919)

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*'.

It was quite clear to the leaders of the emerging independent organisation that they had two objectives - improving the status of women, and the conditions of life in rural areas. These were enshrined in NFWI's Constitution of 1919 '*The main purpose of the Women's Institute movement is to improve and develop conditions of rural life*', and in order to do this WIs will '*provide for the fuller education of countrywomen in citizenship, in public questions both national and international.....*' (Minutes AGM 1919)

So how did they do this? In what follows I shall attempt to answer that question from the top, by analysing the topics being discussed at the AGMs, and from the bottom by looking at what individual Institutes were actually doing.

### **Active citizens – acting nationally**

Any individual WI, or County Federation of WIs, or the National Executive Committee (NEC) could put forward a resolution to be debated at the Annual Meeting. An analysis of the subjects of these resolutions shows how the organisation developed over the first few years. The first resolution on a public affairs topic was at the second AGM in 1918 when Epping WI proposed

*That the provision of a sufficient supply of convenient and sanitary houses being of vital importance to women in the country, County Federations and Women's Institutes are urged to bring pressure to bear upon their local councils and , through the National Federation, upon the Local Government Board to ensure that full advantage is taken in their districts of the Government Scheme for state-aided housing (Minutes AGM 24 Oct. 1918)*

51 resolutions were carried at the AGMs from 1919 to 1926.

32% were about **women** taking their place in society, e.g. standing for election to local councils, supporting the appointment of women to public posts, opposing the disbanding of women police, or about issues specific to women, e.g. maternity care and pensions for widows.

20% were about **children**, their health and schooling, and legislation relating to children e.g. more severe sentences for those who abuse them.

14% were about particular **rural issues** e.g. rural housing, provision of adult education classes in rural areas, collection and disposal of rubbish, animal welfare and some of the regulations affecting farming.

The remaining subjects included amongst other things: urging women to support the Plumage Bill<sup>6</sup>, concern about the press giving too much prominence to crime, Parish

Councils to be elected by ballot and not show of hands, and supporting the League of Nations

30% of the resolutions were expecting WIs to take some action – often to ‘inform themselves’ e.g. about vaccination, or to press their local councils to take some action, as in the resolution about housing referred to above. This was successful, at least one case - in Hertfordshire, a Rural District Council invited members to see the newly built houses which the council considered ‘*are due in great measure to the efforts of the institute*’ (H&C 1925)

But much of the subsequent work after the passing of a resolution was done by the leaders. The National Federation representatives had access to Government Ministers and made their views known and pressed their cases hard. If they were not successful at first then they brought the subject forward again at a subsequent AGM

In the first ten years the leaders were showing the way, over half (56%) of the resolutions brought to AGMs were proposed by either county Federations or the national executive committee. (For further discussion of this see Stamper, *Countrywomen in Action, Voluntary action in NFWI 1917 – 1965*, 2001)

### **Active citizens – acting locally**

In the early days of a new WI the members spent much of their time learning how to run meetings and plan a programme to suit the variety of women who had joined. However many women were aware of particular needs of their village and began to work together to do something about it.

Llanfairpwll WI had shown the way; for although they stressed that the food supply of the country was their main concern, and the programme of lectures and demonstrations were mostly about food and food production, their records show that they were very aware of the needs of the village and did their best to meet some of those needs. They showed concern for less fortunate people; they entertained wounded soldiers, old people and children. In 1916 they set up a *War Loan Association* which was later extended to the whole village and run by an amalgamated committee. When the local branch of the Red Cross got into financial difficulties the WI raised money by running a social evening. ‘*Satisfaction was evinced that the Women’s Institute was able to help the committee out of difficulty*’. (Minutes of Feb 16 1917)

In October 1917 they set up a Club for girls of over 14 years old,. 32 girls joined, paying the subscription of 1/- for a session and 3 or 4 WI members were responsible for each evening. In the following months they had a ‘*sale of articles .... in aid of a British Refugee Fund*’, sent a weekly supply of eggs to the hospital, set up a small lending library, entertained Land Girls, and received permission from the parish council to hold a clinic.

In April 1918 this Institute started its first lobbying; they agreed ‘*that Colonel Cotton be asked to draw up a resolution emanating from the Institute, to be submitted to the Llangefnî County Council*’, as to ‘*whether it would be possible to have some water scheme for Llanfair P G*’. (Minutes, April 1918). It is interesting to note that at that stage

they did not feel confident to do this by themselves but asked their mentor Colonel Cotton. However by the next year they had gained more confidence and, continuing their campaign, 'Mrs Defferd, Mrs Jones and Mrs Williams were deputed to attend on the District Council, with a view to arrange for a supply of water etc., also, to protest against the present state of drainage'. (Minutes Feb 18 1919)

Colonel Stapleton-Cotton expressed the opinion that: 'I consider it (Llanfair WI) has done more good ..... than any social movement I have known. What has impressed me most at the Llanfair meetings is the earnest and unselfish attitude of the women of all classes, of all denominations and their determination to work together for the common good' (Home and Country, Sept 1925)

Thus the members of this first WI set a pattern that was to be followed by many WIs in the future: providing and supporting local services; showing concern for needy people; providing for the young; sharing services with the rest of the village; and campaigning for improvements to rural services.

## Review of 1925

Institute minute books are an invaluable record of 'public work' carried out, and how their members were becoming 'active citizens'. Unfortunately for many WIs these early records have been lost. However we are fortunate that many of the activities of individual institutes were recorded in *Home and Country*, the house journal of NFWI. Founded in 1919, it has been published monthly ever since. In the years 1919 -1926 each issue included a section 'County Federation Notes'. Each County had a *Home and Country Correspondent* who sent, every three months, a report of local activities. These provide a good overview of what was going on round the country.

## Review of 1925

(Note: All the references in this section are to reports in the 1925 issues of *Home and Country*)

I have chosen to focus on 1925, when there were 204,460 members, 3,383 WIs and 54 County Federations. It was the year in which the WI became 10 years old and also a year in which local government elections were held.

The issues of *Home and Country* for 1925 contained 417 reports of Institute activities which fall into a series of well-defined groups. The relative importance of these is illustrated in Figure 1 which shows the proportion of reports in each group.

Insert diagram

### 1. Village amenities and services (31.5%)

The greatest number of reports (9.5%) in this group is of helping the **Village Hall** in some way. In 1925 many new village halls were being built, or had just been built, some of them as war memorials. Most WIs held their meetings in the Village Hall, so it is not



surprising that supporting the hall was important.

The WI is a registered charity and because of its stated aims and objects can only give directly from its funds to support a limited range of other charities. However it can hold special fund raising events, the profits being given to other causes whose charitable aims are compatible. This is what happened with Village Halls. Over half of the references are to money being raised, for example, '*Oldbury on Severn WI by means of small exhibitions contributed £200 to the Parish Memorial Hall*'. Many WIs gave particular items of furnishing or equipment: to the Hall; there are references to providing a piano (WI choirs would need a decent piano), curtains both for the windows and the stage, and kitchen equipment

**Libraries** accounted for 6% of the references. Even 60 years after The Public Libraries Act had been passed rural areas were still poorly served.

*Village libraries were moribund – at the best it was possible to play a game of billiards there; mostly reading rooms were rich in dust and dank in smell, the furniture scant and angular; for reading matter perhaps a shelf of discarded books, a few old magazines, or nothing whatsoever. Women were not supposed to need such a place ( Deneke, 1946, p.91)*

There was money available from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust but County Councils were slow to take up this opportunity. Oxfordshire County Council, for example, refused the offer of a Carnegie grant for starting a County Library giving as their reason '*Oxfordshire people do not want to read!*'. Grace Hadow, NFWI's Vice Chairman at this time, was also Secretary of Barnett House in Oxford and she responded by saying '*We must prove that Oxfordshire people do want to read*'. She organised a collection of books to form a mobile library and through contacts in villages, the WIs forming an important part of this network, was able to show that with the co-operation of local people and voluntary organisations a library could be run in rural areas. The Oxfordshire WIs had thrown their weight into the campaign:

*Some had surprised their local councillor by questioning him on Library policy and roused him by the quite unexpected experience of finding voters interested in Council's doings; as a body they had canvassed for the election of a women candidate to the County Council, who was pledged to the Library scheme and got in. ( Deneke, 1946, pp. 96-7)*

The County Council capitulated. The Village Library collected at Barnett House was incorporated into the Carnegie scheme and the Barnett House librarian became Oxfordshire's first County Librarian.

Once the Libraries were established the WIs helped with running them. For example in Lincolnshire; '*Lindsey County Library Scheme - many WIs have taken a leading part in forming committees to deal with the new village libraries. Some have undertaken to house and distribute the books.*' And the Lancashire Federation reported that; '*rural library work is progressing, 10 centres have been opened and some of them are already asking for more books*'.

The **Village School** was the subject of 5% of the reports. Occasionally money was given directly to the school as in Barnham Broom where money raised at a fete '*went to pay off a debt on the school*', but most of the reports were about practical help. Children walked to school in all weathers and so the work of members like those in Wymondham WI '*were much appreciated by scholars and parents alike*' they '*made slippers for school children out of old felt hats.*' Many of the children lived too far away from school to go home for lunch and there were no school meals, so something hot at lunch time in the winter must have been welcomed. Tysoe WI *gave 320 cups of cocoa to school children from January to April*

Some WIs gave equipment to the school; a piano, boxes of plants for the school gardens. Others gave prizes for the children: Winscombe WI offered '*a prize to the girl or boy who is voted by the master and children as the best citizen in the school.*'

There are frequent reports of WIs providing the children with special treats, especially at Christmas. These always included food and sometimes gifts as well. The children at Froxfield must have been entranced when the WI '*provided a Christmas tree for the school children brilliantly lit by small electric lights supplied from the engine of a motor car drawn up outside the door*'

6% of the reports mention attempts by WIs to get various public services for the village either installed or improved. **Public transport**, for example, '*Longwick WI succeeded in getting a bus service started to connect the village with the railway station and market.*' There are numerous references to bus shelters being provided.

Just as the **water supply** had been of concern to Llanfair WI so it continued to be an issue for WIs in 1925: Kirkbride, WI announced with pride that it '*after persevering for nearly 2 years has at last got an adequate water supply to the village*'

The WI began to be recognized by others as a powerful lobby and at the Cardiganshire Federation Council meeting the County Medical Officer of Health asked the '*WIs to support him in procuring public telephones in remote villages, they agreed to write to the Post Master General*'

## **2. Work for the less fortunate (27%)**

'Charity begins at home' was true for the WIs in 1925. Their work for the less fortunate concentrated mostly on their own neighbourhood. The reports include frequent descriptions of tea parties given to old people and gifts to pensioners e.g. Scawby WI gave a sack of coal to all the pensioners in their village. The Union, or the workhouse was still a feared reality and many WIs provided support by entertaining the inmates, giving presents to the children, or in the case of Colham Green WI visiting '*the local poor law institution to teach the inmates needlework and other handicrafts*'. Local WIs were providing treats or giving toys or dressed dolls to the children in nearby Children's Homes.

WIs in places not far from cities showed their concern for families living in deprived inner areas: Chartridge WI in Buckinghamshire entertained a party of mothers from an

East End Welfare centre, and Cranleigh WI in Surrey paid for 'a *London boy's fortnights holiday in the country*'. In the North, Prestbury WI sent dressed dolls to Manchester Cinderella Club, and Warden WI sent parcels of clothes to a Newcastle parish.

A few WIs responded to international crises: Llanynys WI members made a collection of clothes for Greek refugees, and Grasmere WI had a sale of work for the Near East refugee fund. It is not clear what prompted this action, possibly a personal contact from a member.

### **3. Health (25%)**

In pre National Health Service days WI members were keen to support **hospitals** (13% of the reports). However, of the 77 references to hospitals, only 27 are about giving money. When money was raised it was usually given to the local cottage hospital. In a few cases, when the WI was close to a city, the money went to a children's hospital, for example Warden WI provided two cots at the Truby King Hospital for babies in Newcastle.

The vast majority of help given to hospitals was of a very practical nature; local hospitals were obviously happy to receive fresh produce from the countryside, most frequently mentioned are eggs, for example Wymondham WI records collecting 5,250 eggs for the local hospital in one week, but other gifts included fruit and vegetables, groceries, and cakes. WI members were also busy knitting and sewing and provided: knitted bed socks, flannel bed jackets, and clothes and garments for children. Other help was even more 'hands on' with members helped with mending and making linen

The place of the **District nurse** was very special to the village. Many WIs were pressing for such a service. and once they had secured such a person they appreciated her services. Some WIs were involved in raising money to build a cottage for the nurse, others provided her with a maternity bag, or made a layette for her to give to a needy family. With a nurse in post the village could then set up an **Infant Welfare Clinic** and many WI were involved in this task as well.

### **4. Women in public life (5%)**

Once women had gained the vote the WIs began to encourage them to stand for election. There were Local government elections in March 1925 for County Councils and Urban and Rural District councils. At this stage Parish Councils were elected by show of hands at the Annual Parish Meeting –the WI was campaigning to get them elected by secret ballot.

. The Editorial in February's Home and Country reminded members–

*Countrywomen must use their votes to help to secure the return of the best candidates. The right women are wanted on County Committees. The Institute ought to be training its members in the knowledge of business procedure and of local government methods which are requisite for service on committees*

By May 1925 the results had come in and the successes were being celebrated. The

first woman mayor of Higham Ferras in Northamptonshire was a WI member and two members of the Somerset Federation executive committee had been elected onto the County Council. Elections had also been held for Boards of Guardians, and again WI members were elected, in Epping the WI were proud to announce that a member was head of the poll.

The appointment of members as magistrates was also announced with pride; Mrs Firth was congratulated on being appointed the first women magistrate in the Andover district and the Norfolk Federation executive had 7 JPs and one County Councillor serving on it.

## **5. Youth work (4%)**

Most WIs allowed girls to become members after leaving school at 14, but there were pleas for junior groups, as a means of providing for girls not old enough for the WI. In 1919 NFWI appointed a subcommittee for Guides. The Girl Guide Association had agreed that English and Welsh WIs could form companies of Girl Guides, but then they were to be handed on to the Guide District Commissioner. Other WIs were concerned about providing some social life for the young in the village. For example East Renton WI gave a dance at Christmas and:

*....noticed that many of the lads and girls could not dance, so the committee decided to get these young people together and teach them dancing in the winter months, no fewer than 50 came to the first gathering....it was repeated once a fortnight and a charge of 6d a head covers the cost.....*

Some extra-mural classes were run by Llandinam WI which put on an 'Exhibition of work done by boys of the village under the instruction of a WI craft tutor', while Ningwood and Shalfleet WI organized, with the education committee, cookery classes for the girls.

## **6. War veterans and war memorials (3%)**

In 1925, six years after the end of the war, WIs were still remembering the war veterans and supporting them in a variety of ways, usually by entertaining them at parties. Some were more ambitious, e.g. Eastville WI, *'with assistance from a men's committee, by a whist drive and dance raised enough money to provide an ex service man's family with a weekly allowance of 10s for over a year'*

As already mentioned, Memorial Halls had been built in some villages, but in others fund raising continued, Money for monuments was also raised and once they were in place many WIs record planting a garden round them, or taking on the responsibility of keeping them clean.<sup>7</sup>

## **7. Co-operative purchase (2%)**

The co-operative purchase of goods had been organized since the early days of the WI, buying bulk orders of fish or coal, and then sharing it out obviously made a saving. There were some other goods bought in this way for example Epperstone WI *'started*

*an emergency first aid cupboard open to villagers who can buy bandages, cotton wool etc at a reduced rate’.*

## **8. Concern for countryside (2%)**

Most of the concern for the countryside was about keeping villages free from litter, and getting the Council to clear road verges. However, even at this early date the Isle of Wight recognized a problem which would become of greater concern in future years they *‘raised a petition on behalf of sea birds which are suffering from the pollution of our seas by the discharge of waste oil from ships’.*

## **Conclusion**

In her Chairman’s address at the 1925 AGM Lady Denman said

*....when we look back ten years to the time when the first WIs were formed, we remember that our inspiration came from the war spirit which then prevailed and by war spirit I mean an intense longing to help each other to our utmost capacity, for that, I believe, was the spirit which above all others actuated this country during those years. It will not be possible to keep this spirit alive indefinitely unless we unite in a common purpose*

At the June 16 AGM 1926 Sir George Newman, chief medical officer of health for the Board of Education, addressed the meeting:

*This great movement has enlarged the opportunity of women throughout this country and has added a new power to the extension of the franchise. Franchise extension is good, but its use is better – its use not only on election days but all through the year, and I hope the day may come when the vast number of Institutes which you have shall not only be social and sociable centres but living centres of social service (applause)...*

Country women had become active citizens.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The full name is Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerchwyrndrobwlllllandysillliogogoch, this is actually the invention of a nineteenth century station master seeking fame and tourists. Until 1850 the village was just Llanfair (Davies N, *Europe, a History*, OUP 1996 p310)

<sup>2</sup> The name used in WI circles for the person who chairs both the committee and the WI meeting.

<sup>3</sup> This was considered to be an amount that the wife of a farmer worker could afford. The weekly wage was 40 shillings in 1921

<sup>4</sup> Scotland had a similar but independent organization – The

Scottish Rural Institutes, also inspired by Madge Watt.

<sup>5</sup> This market still runs weekly, it was the first of a nationwide network of similar market stalls which are now registered as WI Country Markets Ltd. There are now 510 Markets, 44,000 share holders (who still only pay 5p for a share), and a turnover in 2000 of £11 million.

<sup>6</sup> 'That this meeting of NFWI urges all women to support the principles of the Plumage Bill now before Parliament' carried May 1921. There was concern that the number of ostriches being killed, in order to provide plumes to decorate hats etc, was endangering the species.

<sup>7</sup> Many women had a relative killed in the war, in Ringmer WI 16% of the members had a relative whose name was on the village war memorial. (Stamper, Countrywomen in Action)

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