

**The Women's Library
London Metropolitan University**

Mainstream Women's Organisations

**A Symposium to mark the opening of the
NFWI archives to public access**

**Saturday 13 March 2004
11.30 am – 4.30 pm**

**Adding *Country to Home* – WI members
entering public life - 1919-1925**

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Abstract

The Women's Institute movement was one of the first attempts in rural Britain to form a really democratic women's organisation and it is probably significant that the concept originated in Canada and was put into practice in wartime; otherwise such a radical and democratic organisation might never have been formed.

The first WI in Britain opened in 1915, and its members agreed to adopt the motto, For Home and Country, used by the Canadian WIs. At first the newly formed WIs concentrated on helping the war torn country to grow more food, but once the war was over this rapidly growing movement of rural women turned its attention to encouraging women to play a more active part in their communities.

Many of the leaders had been active in the women's suffrage movement and they now saw how the WI could educate and encourage women to take up new roles and responsibilities. This paper will describe how women, who had just got the vote, were encouraged to stand in local council elections, and how members like Margaret Winteringham, became role models.

For Home and Country was the motto adopted by the first ever Women's Institute formed in Ontario, Canada, in 1897. It was a Canadian woman, Madge Watt, who formed the first WI in Britain in 1915, at Llanfair PG on Anglesey. She suggested to the members that they adopt this motto along with a somewhat revised version of the Canadian badge, which they agreed.



The Canadian badge (left) and the badge adopted by NFWI

In those early years the WI members knew exactly what '*For Home and Country*' meant – for them it meant putting all their energy into producing as much food as possible to help to feed the war torn country. They grew vegetables, they made preserves from the fruit from their gardens and orchards; they listened to talks on 'vital subjects, such as '*Food Production and Food Values*'¹; they kept poultry and sent vast numbers of eggs to hospitals.

The WI movement grew rapidly and by the end of the war in 1918 there were 773 WIs in England and Wales with 12,007 members. However so closely had many members associated the newly formed WIs with the war effort that some of them thought that now the war was over the WIs would close. Others however could see the great value of this new movement to all women in the rural areas of Britain.

The WI was one of the first attempts in rural Britain to form a really democratic women's organisation, and it is probably significant that the concept originated in Canada and was put into practice in wartime and in a national emergency –

otherwise such a radical and democratic organisation might never have been formed.

It was radical; this was the first time in villages that women of all classes and from all religious backgrounds, and none, started to work together for their mutual benefit and that of the wider community. From the beginning it was an organisation where members shared their talents and skills, and also one where they looked at the needs of the local community and tried to find ways of meeting these needs, either by doing something themselves or by pressing those responsible to act. Quoting from the minutes of Llanfair PG, the first WI, at the meeting held in January 1919

Mrs W E Jones spoke on '*The power women will have in the Reconstruction Scheme*, giving a local example. As a result she was empowered to put a resolution to the meeting which should be forwarded to the District Council' ⁱⁱ

This resolution was about improving the water supply. It was the first example of women who had previously been familiar enough with 'home' beginning to see how by working collectively they might try to do something for 'Country'.

Post war

The leaders reassured the members that *The WI movement is not a war emergency measure but will be of permanent value in the world of rural regeneration*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Countrywomen had a new confidence. During the war, with the men away, they had demonstrated their ability to cope. Women had finally gained the vote and belonging to this new organisation had given women increased freedom and the chance to meet others 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.

In 1919 NFWI started a new venture, an 'in house' magazine, called *Home and Country*. It has been published monthly ever since. A complete set is here in the archives. Through the pages of this magazine the story can be traced.

Many of the leaders 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 new roles and responsibilities. Grace Hadow was the Vice Chairman of NFWI.



Grace Hadow

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:

..... 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 mixed gatherings in villages the women had commonly sat silent, saying that they dare not speak out for fear of being laughed at by their men folk!^{iv} Now, in the WI, they were offered training and given instruction on how to run their own organisation. There are many of the pamphlets produced by NFWI here in the archives including an early one 'Procedure at Meetings' written by the national chairman, Lady Denman, herself. She believed that by providing women with the proper knowledge of procedure they would be equipped to engage in public life.

One man who witnessed this was impressed by the speed with which the women learned, saying that he had been:

"one of the many who doubted the capacity of women to conduct even their ordinary business with success but," he added, "I have learned more about women than I have learned in forty years..."^v.

The importance of this being a safe place for women to learn new skills was recognised when, 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^{vi}

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.^{vii}

The leaders

The early leaders were to prove excellent role models. Many had been active, like Grace Hadow, in the Women's suffrage movement. The first National Chairman was 32 year old Gertrude Denman, wife of Thomas the third Baron Denman, and she remained in the Chair for 30 years.



Lady Denman, photograph taken in 1923 and a drawing of her in action chairing the AGM

Previously, as a member of the Women's Liberal Federation, she had been active in their campaigning for women's suffrage. 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*'.^{viii}

The first Honorary Treasurer of NFWI, Helena Auerbach, had been Honorary Treasurer of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies working alongside Millicent Fawcett.



Helena Auerbach (left) with Lady Denman

One of the members of the first executive committee was Lady Isabel Margesson who had been prominent in the Women's Socialist and Political Union, chairing many of the meetings where Mrs Pankhurst spoke. In 1920 NFWI appointed the first professional General Secretary; she was Inez Ferguson who had previously been Secretary of the National Union of Societies for Equal Citizenship.

Women like these found that leading this fast growing new movement gave great satisfaction, one member is recorded as saying: '*I have never been in any movement, except the suffrage, to compare with the return it gives*'.^{ix}

Then in 1921 the members were provided with a role model *par excellence*: Margaret Winteringham who became known as -'Our Institute MP'. When she was elected to Parliament as the Member for Louth she became the second woman MP and the first English born woman,.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

WI members up in London for that AGM were invited by Margaret to be shown round the Houses of Parliament; she told them that her years of membership of her own WI had been the best training she could have had for her work as an MP. She also said how glad she was to have been elected as a member of NFWI executive committee since she felt that this was proof that the Institutes trusted her to work without any party bias¹.

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

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

In successive years the Annual General Meeting grew in size and influence.

**Table to show the growth of WIs and members
1915 - 1925**

Year	Total no. WIs	Total no. members
1915	12	
1916	37	
1917	187	5,198
1918	773	12,007
1919	1,405	55,015
1920	1,914	99,418
1921	2,237	109,200
1922	2,580	158,560
1923	2,932	174,929
1924	3,223	200,560
1925	3,383	204,460

Location of the AGMs

Year	No of delegates	Venue
1920	1,604	Church House, Westminster
1922	2,351	Kingsway Hall
1923	2,753	The Queens Hall

¹ She obviously succeeded because in the 1926 NFWI executive elections she came 3rd in the poll, the voting was: The Lady Denman, 2,125; Miss Hadow, 1,881; Mrs Wintringham, 1,753; and Mrs Watt, 1,482.

1924	3,055	The Queens Hall
1925	3,320	The Queens Hall

1920, when the total number of WIs was 1,604. the meeting was held in Church House, Dean's Yard Westminster. By 1922 with delegates coming from 2,351 WIs it moved to the Kingsway Hall. But in 1923 the 2,753 WIs were meeting in The Queens Hall, and again in 1924 3,055 WIs were represented. By this time the press had discovered that the new organisation was making its mark and was worthy to be reported. *The Times* of May 15 1923 reported that NFWI 'is one of those comparatively rare democratic bodies which do a large amount of useful work and say very little about it. That same year The Manchester Guardian, Daily News, Westminster Gazette, Morning Post all reported the meeting.

As the meetings grew larger those in public office became interested in addressing the meeting. In 1923 the speakers had been Sir Henry Hadow (brother of Grace Hadow the NFWI vice chairman) whose subject was *Music in the Institutes* and Dr CW Saleeby speaking about *Sunlight and Health*. But in 1925, when there were 3,320 WIs, the guest speakers and were the Rt Hon E F L Wood Minister of Agriculture and Lord Shaftsbury, Chairman of the Development Commissioners. Subsequently both their addresses were published in full in *Home and Country*.

The Manchester Guardian reported

The meeting today was probably the greatest gathering of country women the world has ever seen^{xii}

The AGMs became a focus for the WI year both nationally and locally and the fact that government ministers came to speak, and that the press covered the event fully, increased member's belief that they could influence decision making, that those in power would listen to what they had to say.

Local level

Local WIs were watching with interest as women began be elected. For example Malvern WI noted in their minutes that they had written to congratulate both Nancy Astor and Margaret Winteringham on their election.

But WIs were also encouraging their own members to stand for public office locally

At the AGMs from 1919 to 1925 there were a total of 51 resolutions discussed and voted on, and of these 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.

The first of these was at the 1919 AGM when it was proposed

"That it is advisable to have Women's Organisations such as WI represented on Parish Councils and District Councils or on sub-committees to deal with health and housing"

The proposer of this resolution said:

"....Now that we have this educating body, let us educate our people to realise that it is their duty as citizens to take their part in Parish and District Councils" ^{xiii}

Local WIs were hearing talks urging them to take action. In Battle, Sussex

Mrs Deangate gave a most excellent lecture on 'the power of the vote' followed by a demonstration of dyeing. ^{xiv}

At Orford in East Suffolk they heard

A lecture on The Duty of Women as citizens' followed by a demonstration of bandaging varicose veins ^{xv}

Before long WIs were recording how some of their members had taken up this challenge. By the end of 1920 Mrs Shepherd of Battle WI was standing for the local council and the committee minutes record that:

All committee members present undertook to all they could to get Mrs Shepherd elected to the council at the top of the poll

She does not seem to have made it to top of the poll but the WI was satisfied that

"The chief event of the year had been the election of one of the members, Mrs C Sheppard, to the Council and it was hoped that others would follow her excellent example". ^{xvi}

Lewes St Annes WI offered:

"a hearty vote of congratulation to Mrs Wood on her election as the first woman councillor". ^{xvii}

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 1925 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

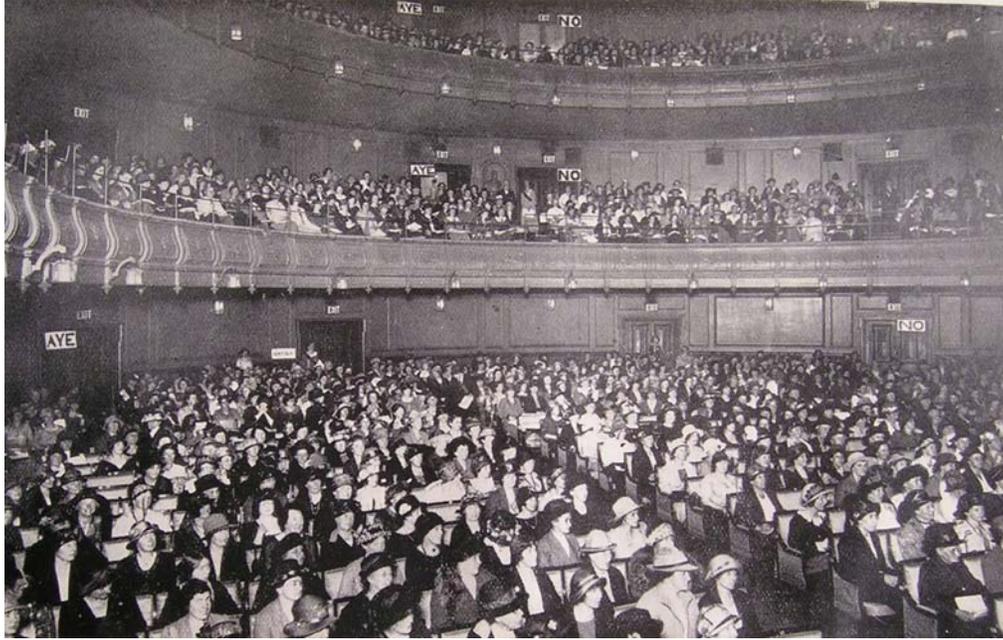
By May 1925 the results had come in and the successes were being celebrated and noted in *Home and Country* and in local WI minute books. The first woman mayor of Higham Ferras in Northamptonshire was a WI member and two members of the Somerset Federation executive committee had been elected onto the County Council. In Epping the WI were proud to announce that one of their members was head of the poll.and so the congratulations continued to be recorded from all over the country.

Conclusion

In the first 10 years the WI had a tremendous impact on the lives of its members. It was in the right place at the right time to encourage newly enfranchised country women to look beyond the limits of 'home' and to the wider horizons of 'country'.



Members of the first WI in Britain 1915



AGM in The Queen's Hall 1925

I end with extracts from two newspaper reports of the time. The first is from an editorial in the Manchester Guardian on May 17th 1923:

The Women's Institutes which were founded so widely and successfully in our villages and tiny country towns during and after the war fulfilled a double purpose. They gave to the political citizenship of the cottage housewife a wider social content than the vote itself could bestow and they have helped to break down the excessive individualism in village life providing in not too austere a way a meeting place and medium for discussion of the world as well as the parish

The second extract is from the Southern Echo of May 21 1925.

I feel this is particularly appropriate on this day when we are celebrating the opening of the NFWI archives to the public

We believe the time will come when the historian, dealing with the rural life of England in this century, will have some extremely interesting and appreciative things to say of the Women's' Institutes as an expression of the better spirit of the time.

I hope so!

Endnotes

ⁱ Davies, Constance; A Grain of Mustard Seed, Gee and Son(Denbigh) 2nd ed 1989 p 105 quoting the Annual Report of Llanfair PG for 1917

ii *ibid* p115

iii Pamphlet: WIs - their part in the Reconstruction of Rural Life, 1917 in archives

iv Jenkins, Inez, *The History of the Women's Institute movement of England and Wales*, OUP, 1953, p5

v. Davies, Constance - p56

vi Minutes, AGM 15/16 October 1919 – NFWI archives

vii *Ibid*

viii Lady Denman, *The Landswoman Journal of the Land Army and the Women's Institute*, Volume 1 March 1918 – Women's Library

ix Robertson Scott, *Story of the Women's Institutes*, The Ibury Village Press, 1925, p.187

x Sykes, Christopher, Nancy, *The Life of Lady Astor*, Granada, 1979, p290 quoting from a collection of essays made by Michael Astor:

Margaret Winteringham was returned to parliament in the election of 1922 with a slightly increased majority. A third woman, Mrs Hilton Philipson, who also was elected to a constituency formerly represented by her husband, joined Nance Astor and Margaret.

Spring 1924 election all three women were elected and were joined by five more. However Mrs W was defeated in the election of Autumn 1924 although she remained involved in Politics. In 1926, after the general Strike, she went with Nancy Astor to visit the poorest areas of South Wales and to learn at first hand about the conditions in which the wives and children of miners lived. She stood again in the 1929 election but lost by a narrow margin, and did not stand again.

xi *Ibid*

xii *The Manchester Guardian* May 20 1923 quoted in *Home and Country*

xiii. Verbatim report of the NFWI AGM 15/16 October 1919, - NFWI archives

xiv Battle WI minutes March 10 1920 East Sussex record office WI 15/1/3

xv *Home and Country* Jan 1920

xvi. Record of meeting of Battle WI for January 1921 ESCC Record Office ref: WI 15/1/3

xvii. Lewes St Anne's WI Record 20 Oct 1920 ESCC Record Office ref:WI 67/1/1