

## LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Vicki Reynolds, Federation Treasurer

Address to Norfolk Federation of WIs at the Centenary Celebration April 12th 2019

Last year the board invited WI presidents to meet with the trustees and WI advisers. So, on a pleasant summer's evening I found myself sitting out in the garden of Evelyn Suffield House with a group of presidents. We chatted about our WIs and how the England football team was progressing in the World Cup (this was before the semi-final). Talk got round to the house and some of the presidents did not know how the federation came to own it. They assumed that the property had been left by a rich WI member! The trustees soon told the story of how the property was acquired.

Later, as I drove home, I reflected on the evening and wondered how many of our current members do not know the story. It was an important event in our history and showed just how far sighted our predecessors were.

The original headquarters was rented offices at 3 Davey Place, Norwich. In 1939 they moved to 3 Castle Street. In 1950 a resolution was passed that the executive committee purchase a building or building site for a permanent WI HQ. Under the heading "finance" it stated "the decision of the council meeting that a permanent HQ for the movement in Norfolk be established lays a great responsibility on all, and your committee is glad to realise that institutes are already planning to raise a fund for this purpose"

This was just five years after the end of World War 2. Petrol rationing only ended in May 1950, but rationing on sweets and sugar went on until 1953 and it was not until 1954 it came off meat and all other food. The national average full-time weekly wage was £7.08 and Norfolk being a predominately farming county wages would have been below that figure.

The committee report for the year ended 31st December 1952 recorded that the move to new premises at 45 All Saints Green, a grade 2 listed building, took place on 31st July. The Building Fund of £500 and £1500 of the Reserve Fund provided part payment and the National Provincial Bank Ltd allowed an overdraft of £2000 on special terms, since when donations from WIs and individuals have reduced this amount to £1108. Your committee appeal to institutes to join with them in clearing the £1000 due to the bank during coronation year, which will save payment of interest on the overdraft.

I am in awe of those members who back in 1950 wanted their own HQ and in 2 years achieved their goal. It really was a truly magnificent effort and we owe them so much. They were so forward thinking. Evelyn Ninham, a current board member recalls how she helped her mother bake cakes and biscuits for London WI as part of their fund raising efforts.

Currently, Evelyn Suffield House is insured for £900,000.

Reading later annual reports a lot of the internal decorating was undertaken by members. One such mention was as follows:

"Mrs Newstead, Mrs Scales and Mrs Harvey between them redecorated the general offices, painted the ceiling in the Colman Room and stripped the walls. The painting and paper-hanging were undertaken by Mrs Newstead who made a professional job of it". She and her husband also took care of the garden.

In 1988 it was proposed to sell the property but outside events scuppered this - the Chancellor of the Exchequer withdrew Mortgage Interest Relief At Source causing the property market to crash. The federation decided to keep the house and make essential repairs.

Keeping the house in good condition is costly. In the past we have asked WI's to fund raise e.g. for a new roof. More recently we have had grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and Norfolk to help with the cost of damp proof work on outside walls and replacement windows.

In the last 3 years over £21000 has been spent on repairs to the ceiling in the committee room, repairs to the boundary walls and buttresses and most recently the cracks to the ceiling and walls in the first floor offices. This alone cost in excess of £10000. A very expensive course of Botox.

Coral and I recently went to a performance of the Sheringham Shantymen in aid of St Peters Church, Sheringham. The vicar thanked the singers and explained to the audience that it cost £132000 to run the church last year. Walking back in the car Coral said thank our lucky stars we only have a grade 2 listed house to look after and not a church!

Evelyn Suffield House is ours - the Norfolk members. We are the current custodians and must make sure that it is kept in good order for all future members. Please do come and visit your house. It is only a couple of minutes from the bus station and in the centre of the city.

**Evelyn Suffield House is a jewel in the chairman's brooch.**