

## Women's Institute 1915 to 1929

The Women's Institute (WI) was formed in 1915 to revitalise rural communities and encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War. At the same time the women's suffrage movement had been making people, including women themselves, re-evaluate their position in society. It was said that 'The suffragists made the pot to boil.....the Institute movement showed how some things could be got out of the pot'.

Once the war was over, the newly formed WIs began to concentrate on planning programmes of activities to suit their members. This new organisation attracted members from the Lady of the Manor to her housemaid and cook: from the local shop keeper to the wife of the farm labourer. Working together in the WI helped break down the social barriers between countrywomen who had rarely met in the past. Women (well those over 30 at least!) had now received the vote and the National Board was anxious to encourage women to become active citizens. At the AGM in 1920 they passed a resolution urging the Government to pass the Bastardy Bill without delay and encouraged members to stand for District and Parish Councils and for the committees dealing with health and housing.

Mrs Margaret Winteringham, WI member and Honorary Secretary to Lindsey (Lincolnshire) Federation, was elected as Member of Parliament for Louth. She was the first English born female MP and only the second woman to be elected to Parliament.

Grace Hadkow, National Vice Chairman, was a founder member of the Oxford Women Students Society for Women's Suffrage and was there when the members bore its magnificent banner in the great procession for Women's Suffrage of 1908 to the Albert Hall. She said 'I am glad that I belong to a generation which has been stoned – not because I like being stoned (it is tiresome, and often messy), but since some women had to go through that to win the thing, it is a bit of luck not to have been out of it entirely. I record it here because it looks as if one of the results of the war was going to be the grant of the parliamentary franchise to women. In years to come it may interest people to realise that before the war law-abiding and peaceful women like myself, quite inconspicuous members of a political party, got to take being mobbed and insulted as part of the ordinary day's work.' She felt it essential that women learned to take responsibility and learned how to run the organisation along democratic lines; she was largely responsible for drafting the NFWI Constitution which had the following as its base: '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'.

Her professional life ran alongside her work with NFWI. She was Secretary of Barnet House in Oxford from 1920 - 1929 during which time she worked hard to get rural libraries established, was responsible for the setting up of the Oxfordshire Rural Community Council, the first in the country. She was a member of the executive committee of the National Council for Social Services, the BBC Advisory Council and the Adult Education Committee of the Board of Education. From 1921 she was Principal of the Society of Oxford Home Students out of which grew St Anne's College. There is a memorial tablet to her in the University Church of St Mary in Oxford.

Many others who served on that first National Executive Committee were also active Suffragettes: Lady Denman, Helena Auerach, and Lady Isobel Margesson who had driven Mrs Pankhurst around in her car. Even their staff: Margaret Hitchcock, and Inez Fergusson had been activists. Some of those in local WIs had been involved in the suffrage movement. One renowned person was Edith Rigby, the first President of Hutton and Howick WI in

Lancashire who had been a suffragette and was gaoled 7 times, once for planting a bomb in the Liverpool Corn exchange. She went on hunger strike and was forcibly fed. Berkswell WI in Warwickshire had three members who had been keen supporters of the suffragette movement. They took a stone from Berkswell to London to throw through the window of 10 Downing Street and were later arrested and imprisoned for their activities.

Modern members may not be Suffragettes, but still hold that the empowerment of women comes through the movement by Education and being involved not for what they can get but for what they can give for the benefit of all.