

## Voluntary Action History Society

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Institute for  
Volunteering Research

### **Voluntary Action History Society**

Facts & figures on  
volunteering in the UK

### **Voluntary Action of Membership Organisations: Countrywomen Organise their Own Education**

Research summaries

The story starts in Ontario in Canada in 1897. I lived in Ontario in the 1960s, and even then it was still an empty country: miles of forests difficult to penetrate and innumerable lakes with boggy edges. Frozen from November till March, snow-covered – hot and humid with lots of black fly in the summer. The roads ran for miles through the forests, and then (in northern Ontario at least) about every 50 miles there was a small settlement. It seemed incredibly isolated in the 1960s; what must it have been like in the 1890s?

Voluntary Action  
journal

News from the  
Institute

I started to find out more when in 1998 I was commissioned to write a book about the history of adult education in the WI to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the opening of Denman College.

It may come as a surprise that the first Women's Institute was formed in 1897 in a small village in Ontario for the purpose of educating its members. Here is a quote from one of the early minute books:

*A nation cannot rise above the level of its homes, therefore we women must work and study together to raise our homes to the highest possible level.*

So what was life for women like in rural Ontario in the 1890s? The majority of the women were farmer's wives. Mostly they were first-generation immigrants, many of them from Europe. The women worked on the farm, often in charge of the small domestic animals, making butter etc. They did all the domestic chores, which often involved carrying water from wells. They bore and reared the children and nursed the sick and elderly. The infant mortality rate was high and life was hard in those isolated conditions.

But as is so often the case, the vision and enterprise of one particular person was a catalyst for change. That person was Adelaide Hoodless.

Adelaide Hunter was born in 1857, the tenth child in the family. Her father, who had died several months before her birth, was an Irish Protestant who had emigrated with his parents. The family lived in an isolated farmstead. As the youngest of such a large one-parent family, Adelaide's formal education was minimal. While some of her brothers went to college, she attended a local community school.

When she was 24 Adelaide married John Hoodless, who came from a prosperous business family in Hamilton. So she left the rural area and farming and came to live in Hamilton. They had four children, two boys and two girls, but sadly the youngest boy, John Harold, died aged fourteen months in August 1889. The cause of death seems to have been an intestinal infection resulting

from drinking contaminated milk. In Hamilton in those days milk was delivered in open containers, accessible to flies and other disease-carriers. Adelaide seems to have blamed herself for the baby's death, and for the rest of her life she was particularly concerned with domestic hygiene.

As the wife of a well-to-do Hamilton businessman, Adelaide was involved in the local community and in the church. John Hoodless was a member of the local Board of Education, and became its chairman. He frequently visited schools in the city and Adelaide often accompanied him, which gave her a considerable insight into the education system. She subsequently wrote:

*Education for education's sake is very beautiful in theory, but when we come down to facts, I venture to say that 90 per cent of those who attend our schools seek education for its practical benefits.1*

As a result of her visits to schools, Adelaide came to think that the education of girls ought to be extended to include the practical skills they would need when they grew up and ran homes and looked after families.

Domestic science was a fairly new concept in north America, so sometimes her audiences wanted to know exactly what it meant. This is a definition she gave:

*Domestic Science is the application of scientific principles to the management of the home. It teaches the value of pure air, proper food, systematic management, economy, care of children, domestic and civil sanitation and the prevention of disease. It calls for higher and higher ideals of home life and more respect for domestic occupations. In short, it is a direct education for women as homemakers. The management of the home has more to do with the moulding of character than any other influence, owing to the large place it fills in the life of the individual during the most plastic stage of development. We are therefore justified in an effort to secure a place for home economics or domestic science, in the education institutions of this country.2*

Adelaide Hoodless was a woman of vision, with the courage and ability to fight for a broader education for women. She regarded the promotion of home economics as a means of elevating women's work to the level of a profession and to put it on a par with a man's work.

In 1893 Adelaide was one of the Canadian delegation to the International Congress of Women at the Chicago World's Fair. On their return from Chicago, these women set up the Canadian National Council of Women and Adelaide was elected the first Treasurer.3

Adelaide continued to campaign for the introduction of Domestic Science into the school curriculum. She spoke on the subject all over Ontario. In December 1896 she was invited to speak to a conference of the Farmer's Institute at the Ontario Agricultural College in Guelph. Her subject was 'The Relation of Domestic Science to the Agricultural Population', and she began:

*When asked by your secretary to give an outline of the course in Domestic Science suitable for an agricultural population, I felt somewhat puzzled at first to know where to make a distinction between life in a country house and in that of a city home . . .4*

After referring to one expert who claimed that poor food, overwork and monotony were contributing factors in the high rate of insanity among rural

people, she outlined her suggestions:

*The causes are easily preventable . . . by scientific knowledge of the various articles of food and their nutritive value, and . . . by the introduction of schools of domestic science in the rural districts, with lecture courses and clubs for farmers' wives, where better methods for producing good results in butter making, poultry raising, bee culture, house decoration, cookery etc. may be intelligently discussed, thereby providing the best class of recreation, which is pleasure and profit combined . . .*

*Farmers are beginning to realise the importance of scientific knowledge . . . Is it of greater importance that a farmer should know more about the scientific care of his sheep and cattle, than that a farmer's wife should know how to care for her family, or that his barns should have every labour saving contrivance, while she toils and drudges on the same old treadmill instituted by her grandmother, perhaps even to carrying water from a spring a quarter of a mile from the house, which I know has been done . . .5*

That call for continuing education for women living in rural areas had immediate results. Erland Lee, secretary of the Farmer's Institute of Wentworth County, was in the audience and he invited Adelaide to speak at the next Ladies' Night of his Institute.

### **Formation of the first WI**

Adelaide Hoodless accepted this invitation and addressed the meeting at Wentworth County Farmer's Institute, at which there were 35 wives present as guests. Her talk was about the importance of women's education in all branches of domestic science and homecraft. Towards the end of her address she suggested that, just as the men had a Farmer's Institute, so the women should have their own organisation. The women present were enthusiastic about this idea and fixed a meeting for the following week to discuss it further. They planned to invite other women to join them, and they asked Adelaide to come back again and speak.

It must have taken some effort, in this scattered rural area in a Canadian February, to persuade women to attend the meeting at such short notice. There were 101 women at the meeting as well as Erland Lee, who took the chair. Adelaide presented the same arguments as Lee had heard at Ontario Agricultural College. She pointed out that if the men felt the need for an organisation, and if it enabled them to grow better crops of hay, grain and fruit and to produce better livestock, then an institute for the women would be equally helpful in their work.

The purpose of such an association for women would be not only to broaden their knowledge of domestic science and agriculture but also to bring women together to socialise. 'Life on a farm can be pretty dull and lonely,' she said. 'I know, I was brought up on one.'

The women were convinced and they formed the first Women's Institute. Janet Lee was one of the first committee members and Adelaide Hoodless was invited to be honorary President, which she accepted. She only 'attended its meetings from time to time entering into the discussions and giving members timely and acceptable advice'.<sup>6</sup>

## **The development of the WIs in Canada**

The successful growth of the WI really depended on Erland Lee and his wife Janet. Erland and two friends who were members of the Federal parliament helped the newly formed WI committee to draft a constitution and by-laws. The first constitution, adopted at the initial meeting, read in part:

*The object of this Institute shall be to promote knowledge of household science which shall lead to the improvement in household architecture with special attention to sanitation, to a better understanding of economics and hygiene value of foods and fuels, and to a more scientific care of children with a view to raising the general standards of our people.<sup>7</sup>*

Erland Lee also wrote on behalf of the new organisation to the superintendent of the Farmer's Institute to ask for affiliation, and to the Minister of Agriculture to request government co-operation and support. It is worth noting here the important role that these men played in getting a women's organisation off the ground; this was to be repeated, as we shall show later, when the WIs came to England and Wales.

Other WIs were soon started. By 1919 there were 900 branch Institutes in the Federated Women's Institutes of Ontario.

## **The education programme of the newly formed WIs**

The real purpose of the first Institute, as we have seen, was to educate the members in order to raise the standards of running a home and a family. A few quotations from the early minutes of Stoney Creek WI illustrate how the first WI members went about doing this:

*A nation cannot rise above the level of its homes, therefore we women must work and study together to raise our homes to the highest possible level*

*In order that we may carry out to better advantage the objects for which the Institute was organised, we shall divide them into six divisions or classes as follows:*

- 1. Domestic economy*
- 2. Architecture, with special reference to heat, light, sanitation and ventilation*
- 3. Health, embracing physiology, hygiene, callisthenics and medicine*
- 4. Floriculture and horticulture*
- 5. Music and art*
- 6. Literature, education, sociology and legislation<sup>8</sup>*

At the second regular meeting there was 'a paper on "The proper feeding of children"'; at the next meeting a Dr Mabel Henderson spoke on 'The child in health and disease', after which there was a discussion and question and answer session. At the following meeting there was a demonstration of 'First aid to the injured' and at subsequent meetings there were papers, addresses, discussions and demonstrations on such subjects as 'Sunshine in the home', 'Home sanitation' and 'Home making versus housekeeping'.

By the end of its first year Stoney Creek WI had seventy-five members, with an average attendance of sixty. As the WI developed, some of the women met together in a study circle:

*The progressiveness and earnestness of these pioneer members is also shown by their purchase, early in 1898, of the Chautauqua Books on Domestic Science, and their meeting regularly once a month to read and discuss them.*<sup>9</sup>

The emerging WIs were supported by the Farmer's Institutes and in 1901 the latter started to include at their annual conferences sessions of interest to WI members. The Ontario Department of Agriculture also provided a speakers' service for WIs. One WI leader wrote subsequently of these :

*By the guidance of the speakers, correct procedure along business lines and methods of work became part of each institute thereby developing leadership . . .*<sup>10</sup>

The reports from the WIs in these early years show appreciation of the speakers. The report from North Grey reads:

*There are eight branch Institutes in North Grey, all of which are in good running order . . . The library is not very extensive. A few books have been purchased . . . such as 'Dust and its Dangers', 'Emergencies', 'The Chemistry of Cooking and Cleaning' . . . The grant of \$20 which we received last year was spent in securing the services of Miss Agnes Smith of Hamilton, a very capable instructor in Domestic Science.*

*One of the many benefits derived from our Institute is the bringing together of intelligent women, and also of timid and retiring ones who live secluded lives. The Institute is removing the idea that one's education ceases with school days. Women in rural districts are beginning to realise that more is expected of them than simply to prepare three meals a day and do what little sewing they can do for their families. Many have prepared excellent papers, which have been a happy surprise both to themselves and their listeners.*<sup>11</sup>

Another district reported:

*Our Institute has educational value. How many of us knew much about bacteria until we heard Miss Maddock at our meetings? We have learned so much now that if we have typhoid fever or scarlet fever, we do not say 'This is the Lord's will', but examine drains, sinks, cellars, walls and backyards where we know there may be conditions favourable to the development of these germs. We have learned that the best way to get rid of them is to let the sunshine stream in. We know that sunshine means health.*<sup>12</sup>

The WIs provided the opportunity for women who had previously lived very isolated lives to meet together on a regular basis. At first they concentrated on their own educational needs, but the more they learned the more they started to recognise the deficiencies in their communities compared with urban areas. With the new self confidence they had gained, these women began to work together to bring about social change. They worked to get libraries, recreational centres, schools, hospitals and health centres provided for their communities. In order to do this, the women had to become more informed about the legislation and administration of both the country and the province, so that they could begin to influence the decision makers. Their education was continuing.

## WI comes to Wales and England

The rural areas of England and Wales were an educational backwater at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In the urban areas there were many new initiatives in adult education: for example, the Workingmen's Institutes, the People's Colleges, the Workers Educational Association, the University Settlements, the University Extension classes, the Mechanics Institutes, the YMCA and the Co-operative movement. These developments hardly touched the rural areas.

This was a period of agricultural decline. Between 1871 and 1900 over two million acres of arable land had gone out of production, and unemployment was very high among agricultural workers as many farmers went bankrupt.<sup>13</sup> The government tried to encourage the flagging industry, and a Board of Agriculture was set up in 1889. In 1901 an Agricultural Organisation Society (AOS) was formed. Its purpose was to start local societies of farmers, smallholders and growers so that they could work co-operatively to improve their output. In 1904 Edwin Pratt published *The organisation of agriculture in England and other lands*, in which he described the Canadian Farmer's Institutes and their associated Women's Institutes. He wrote that WIs might educate British countrywomen, but he stimulated no interest – could an idea from the Empire be relevant in Britain?

In the rural areas there was little time for education. The vicar of Broughton Blean in Kent described the aims of Sunday schools as being:

*to furnish opportunities of instruction to the children of the poorer part of the parish, without interfering with any industry of the weekdays . . . The children are to be taught to read and to be instructed in the plain duties of the Christian religion, with a particular view to their good and industrious behaviour in their future character as labourers and servants.*<sup>14</sup>

A 'country gentleman' asked:

*Suppose that some friend of humanity were to attempt to improve the condition of the beasts of the field – to teach the horse his power, and the cow her value – would he be that tractable and useful animal he is, would she be so profuse of her treasures to a hapless infant? Could anything be more impolitic?*<sup>15</sup>

In spite of such views, there were some people who could imagine a better way of treating those who lived in rural areas – even the women! Robert Greig, a staff inspector of the Board of Education, had carried out an investigation into agricultural instruction in other countries. In his report, published in 1912, he referred to the Women's Institutes he had found in Canada. He explained that a WI is:

*an association of farmers' wives, daughters and sisters who meet periodically to hear lectures, read papers, and study books of dairying, poultry keeping, gardening, and all the minor rural industries; on cooking, laundry work, and dressmaking; on household sanitation, home hygiene and ambulance methods; and the choice and care of furniture and pictures; and the rearing and education of children and on any other means for the improvement of country life. The institutes also have a recreative side, and attention is given to music and literary subjects.*<sup>16</sup>

He concluded that:

*perhaps the most profitable outlet for the expenditure of energy and public money in the improvement of agriculture will be found in widening the mental horizon of the farmer's wife and especially the wife of the labourer, small holder, and working farmer . . . the farmer's wife is a partner in his business; on her management of the dairy, poultry yard and piggery much of his profit depends.*<sup>17</sup>

Still nothing happened, which is hardly surprising if the attitudes of the vicar and the 'country gentleman' were very widely held. It took more than books or pamphlets to get the WIs started – it took a determined woman from Canada and a world war.

The determined Canadian woman was Madge Watt. She had been a founder member of the first WI formed in British Columbia, and had then become involved in forming other WIs. In 1911, when the Department of Agriculture for British Columbia gave official recognition to the WI, it appointed Madge to the advisory committee to assist in forming and guiding institutes. She was a well-educated woman, having attended Toronto University, taking Honours Moderns, and had later done postgraduate work. Not only had she worked for WIs in British Columbia, but she was also involved with University Women's Clubs and the National Council of Women. In 1913 she was elected to the senate of University of British Columbia.

In that same year, however, her husband, Dr Alfred Tennyson Watt, who had worked for the Dominion Civil Service in British Columbia, died. Madge decided to bring her two sons to England to complete their schooling. Once here, she wanted to start WIs in this country. She pressed her case hard. Both before and after the outbreak of war, she addressed public meetings, spoke at gatherings and in private houses, always and everywhere urging that Institutes should be started. However, she was a Canadian. She had no special knowledge of English village life and a complete ignorance of many of its problems.

Just as the start of the WI in Ontario had required the catalyst of a man – Erland Lee – so the beginnings of the WI in this country had a male catalyst: Nugent Harris, secretary of the Agricultural Organisations Society (ADS). He heard Mrs Watt speaking at a conference, and became convinced that WIs were just what was necessary. He wrote:

*For many years as the secretary to the ADS 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.'*

*I would not rest until I could establish some movement that would give the women-folk a chance to express themselves free from fear of being ridiculed by the men. By the merest chance I met Mrs Watt. I felt I had come in touch with the very movement I wanted.*<sup>18</sup>

The social climate in Britain at that time was very different from that in the

pioneer communities of Canada, where life was harder but more equal. In the rural communities of Britain there was a very narrow, hidebound society containing groups who were suspicious of each other.

*When they were old enough they joined the conservative association if their parents were conservative, the liberal association if they were liberals and the other party if their parents were otherwise. Very much in the same way they went to church or to chapel or nowhere. They even bought their tea and sugar, their boots and shoes, their drapery and the ironmongery at conservative-church shops or at liberal-chapel shops or at the co-op. And during the rest of their lives these party denominationalists seemed to make a habit if not a virtue of keeping as much out of each other's way as they could . . .*

*Our population had too narrow an education. It had not been trained to work together, there were barriers of heaven knows how many classes and sections which would have to be broken down.<sup>19</sup>*

Even with Nugent Harris's support it still took considerable time – and another one or two enthusiastic men – to get the new organisation started. Colonel the Hon Stapleton Cotton was one of the governors of the ADS, and Chairman of the North Wales branch; he suggested that a Welsh village would be good place to 'try out' the idea of a WI. The reason he gave was that in every Welsh village there were several places of worship, each with its own social organisation, where country women met – but they never met together as a whole community. Colonel Cotton's view was that if a non-party and non-denominational organisation for countrywomen could be established in Wales, then its success in other places was assured!

The outbreak of the First World War was also a factor in making the idea of WIs acceptable in Britain. 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 women.

At the following annual meeting of the ADS a resolution was carried – mostly with the support of men – to adapt the Canadian idea of WIs to suit English rural conditions and that the ADS should become responsible for the work. On 14 July 1915 the governors of ADS acted on the resolution passed at the AGM and set up a Women's Institute Committee. Nugent Harris was authorised to engage Madge Watt as an organiser.

But Madge had jumped the gun. On Tuesday 15 June she had spoken to a meeting of the North Wales branch of the Agricultural Organisation Society in Bangor, on the subject of 'Women's work in agriculture'. This meeting was convened by Stapleton Cotton as Chairman of the North Wales branch. Also present at this meeting were Sir Harry Reichel, Principal of the University College at Bangor, who had a real interest in rural education and 'had a keen perception of the good that would accrue from extending the benefits of education and social development to countrywomen'.<sup>20</sup>

### **Formation of first WI at Llanfairpwll**

Stapleton Cotton and his wife were impressed by what they had heard at the meeting in Bangor, and the very next day they called a meeting of women in their Anglesey village, Llanfairpwll.<sup>21</sup> The report in the *North Wales Chronicle*

for 18 June 1915 reads:

*A well attended meeting, presided over by Col Stapleton Cotton, was held at Graig, by permission of Mrs WE Jones, on Wednesday. The lecturer was Mrs Watt, a lady from British Columbia, who gave an interesting account of the work done in that portion of the Empire, by means of the Women's Institute. It was proposed by Mrs Wilson, seconded by Miss Watts, Aber Braint, that a society of this description be established in the village. The motion was passed unanimously.*<sup>22</sup>

Mrs Stapleton Cotton became the first President, a committee was formed and they agreed to have monthly meetings of 'an educational and social character' on the first Tuesday in each month 'at 2 pm in the room kindly lent by Mrs W E Jones, until such time as the Women's Institute has its own building'.<sup>23</sup>

Stapleton Cotton gave help and support to the new WI. About six months after the opening he wrote to Madge Watt that he had himself been

*one of the many who doubted the capacity of women to conduct even their ordinary business with success, but I have learned more about women than I have learned in forty years . . . I see and believe that women can and will bring all classes, all denominations, all interests, all schools of the best thought together in that common brotherhood of love . . . which every man and every woman longs for in his or her innermost heart.*<sup>24</sup>

Llanfairpwll was a good place to start the first WI. The University College at Bangor, just over the Menai Straits, had agricultural studies in its curriculum. There was a supportive Principal, so there was an opportunity to invite as speakers some of the staff there who knew about the latest developments in agriculture. But all was not easy. As the minutes of the first annual meeting of the new WI show, some of Mrs Watt's ideas needed interpretation:

*Mrs Watt, who was connected with the movement in Canada, attended our first meeting and explained the objects and working, as well as the rules, which we have followed as far as is consistent with the different circumstances of life in Anglesey.*<sup>25</sup>

In Britain the social fabric was unlike that of Canada. The newly formed WI found supporters in the Marquis and Marchioness of Anglesey, who lived at Plas Newydd, the 'big house'. Lady Anglesey became Patron, and they gave permission for the new WI to use Toll Gate House free of rent until they could build their own hall on the adjacent land, which they also donated. Thus they set a pattern of support from the 'big house' which was followed for many of the WIs formed in villages throughout the country in the coming years. Indeed, in the early days if the 'big house' did not support the formation of a WI (and often the Lady of the Manor became the President), then the WI was either not formed or did not flourish.

The subjects for the meetings during the first year of Llanfairpwll WI reflect how the programme was adapted to local needs. At the first committee meeting it was agreed 'that the food supply of the country be the special subject for discussion', and the programme planned for the first year clearly reflected this decision.

At the meetings, 'papers were read and demonstrations given':

*Professor Robinson read a most instructive and learned paper on 'Food values and diet'.*

*Professor Philips, of the University, gave a short talk on the Gathering of Wild Herbs; those required for medicinal purposes. It had been the hope of some members that this might be the objective of the Institute for the summer but, as the lecturer pointed out very forcibly, each individual effort should be turned towards producing food; any object taking time from this latter should not be started. We shall take the Professor's advice and leave it for the present.*

*Mrs Hunter Smith of the University, Bangor, The easiest and most humane way of killing a fowl; also the proper manner in which to dress and prepare it, so as to increase its marketable value.*

Other speakers came from outside agencies; for example:

*Explanation of The Board of Agriculture's poultry scheme.*

*Lecturer provided by the Agricultural Organisation Society – the conservation and bottling of fruit.*

But local people also spoke. The minutes record:

*Dr Williams spoke at length on a Nursing and maternity scheme.*

*Dr Price of Bangor spoke forcibly and to the point on the dangers of flies and rubbish heaps.*

and the egregious Stapleton Cotton 'demonstrated in a masterly fashion on salads and salad dressings'.

The minutes also show that from time to time the members took action following a talk or demonstration. After a talk on 'The buying of good seed' they agreed to buy co-operatively. They heard a talk on 'The women's labour on the land question' and decided that 'a canvass of the village be taken as to potential help'.

The Canadian WIs, as they became established, had moved towards taking social action. The same thing happened to this new WI. The members began to recognise ways in which their community could be improved. In April 1918 Col Cotton was asked to draw up a resolution emanating from the Institute, to be submitted to the County Council at Llangefni, as to 'whether it would be possible to have some water scheme for Llanfairpwll'; and this was followed later by a 'Deputation to the Parish Council about the water question'.<sup>26</sup>

The obvious success of Llanfairpwll WI led to other WIs being opened in places near by. They responded in different ways to the challenge of increasing food production:

*In response to the urgent need for increased food production and distribution the Criccieth WI (then only 6 months old) opened a small market stall early in the Summer of 1916.<sup>27</sup>*

From this first enterprise sprang what is now WI Country Markets Ltd, which has more than 500 markets throughout England and Wales and a turnover in 1993 (the year it became independent of NFWI) of £10.4 million, most of which is returned to the shareholders.

## Spread of WIs

On 2 December 1915 Madge Watt reported to the committee that she had formed the first WIs in England: in Singleton in Sussex, Wallisdown in Dorset and Sevenoaks Weald and Kemsing in Kent. The subcommittee supplied model rules based on those of the WIs in Canada; these rules defined the non-sectarian and non political character, which was so important in the early days.<sup>28</sup>

By the autumn meeting there were 24 WIs, and the committee decided that it was time to appoint a permanent chairman. The chosen person was Lady Denman.

## How education developed in the early WIs

In 1917 the organisation, by now with 137 WIs, became independent of the Board of Agriculture and elected its own leaders. Lady Denman was Chairman for the first 30 years.

Lady Denman, called Trudie by her family, was the daughter of a wealthy industrialist who had interests in oil and was also a newspaper owner; a staunch Liberal, he was later (1910) to become Baron Cowdray. She married a young Liberal peer, Thomas, the third Baron Denman. She had already served on the executive committee of the Women's Liberal Federation, an organisation of 100,000 women whose main business at this time was women's suffrage.

The WI was not Lady Denman's only interest: she was also involved with the beginnings of the Family Planning Association, and was the moving spirit and Director in Chief of the Women's Land Army. She served on various government sub-committees: as Chairman in 1926 of the Denman Committee on the Practical Education of Women for Rural Life; in 1940 as a member of the Rushcliffe Committee on Voluntary Service; and in 1941 on the Scott Committee on Land Utilisation in Rural Areas. These brought a whole network of contacts to help the newly emerging WI.

The pattern of meetings was largely based on what happened in the Canadian WIs – which is hardly surprising as Madge Watt had been responsible for forming both. She stated that the aims of the WI were :

1. *To stimulate interest in the agriculture industry;*
2. *To develop cooperative enterprises;*
3. *To encourage home and local industry;*
4. *To study home economics;*
5. *To provide a centre for educational and social intercourse and for all local activities.*

She wrote that:

*In our work we aim at helping everything to do with agriculture, and especially just now with agricultural production. We aim at bringing technical knowledge into the farmhouse. If you come to think of it, the farmer's wife has more time for reading than the farmer; she is therefore more open minded. She could*

*attend the technical meeting at the institute and bring back the knowledge into the home. We want this; we want her to be able to get at books on rural economics and demonstrations of labour saving machinery both farm and home. Then she takes back the knowledge she has gained into the farm home, and talks it over with her husband or sons. The farmer will say that the science of farming is not a woman's job, but it is exactly what she ought to know about. So we want the farmer's wife to attend the Women's Institute; we want her to get into the habit of seeing books and papers on the science of farming, and to link up her own home interests with her husband's business interests.*<sup>29</sup>

When discussing how to interest the 'village women' in the newly formed WI. Madge Watt said:

*I tell them that their lives may have been dull, and how hard they must have worked, and they perhaps have not had all the advantages that they should have had . . . I tell them of how other WIs have learned haircutting, to buy a ladder to be able to pick the fruit off the tops of their trees . . . I tell them that we can teach them where to apply for cheap pig food, where to apply for club rules to run a poultry or rabbit club, where to apply for garden lecturers, where to buy their seed potatoes . . .*

*I tell them of starch made with diseased potatoes; how they can dry their own currants at home; how they can learn much by seeing what others can do in the arrangements of the house; how women have learned to paper and paint their own houses; how they have learned tinkering and cobbling and done so many things the country thought a women never could do.*<sup>30</sup>

In July 1919 Madge Watt returned to Canada, but not before she had 'the satisfaction of starting a WI at Sandringham of which H M The Queen is President'<sup>31</sup> – the WI has never had a royal Patron. When Sandringham WI was formed, Queen Mary paid her subscription and became the first President. The story is told that she sent a lady in waiting to give the WI treasurer £1, and 18/- was sent back as change; all members were to pay the same 2/- subscription.

By the end of 1919 there were 26 county federations with a total of 1,405 WIs. At this point the NFWI Executive Committee took over all the running of the Federation with a grant of £10,000 from the government to see them on their way. They had to decide what kind of an organisation the National Federation would be in peacetime. During the war much of the emphasis had been on producing food; now was the time when strong leadership would plan the direction in which the WIs should develop.

In formulating these plans Lady Denman was supported by her very able Vice Chairman, Grace Hadow.

Grace was born on 9 December 1875, the youngest child of the Revd William Hadow and his wife Mary, of South Cerney near Cirencester. She went up to Somerville College, Oxford, in 1900, at a time when a first-class education was rare for a girl. The few women who were at Oxford were allowed to study and to take examinations, but were not allowed to receive degrees. In 1903 Grace was awarded a first class in the Honours school of English language and literature, and in 1904, following a teaching engagement in America, she took up the post of English tutor at Somerville. A year later she became resident English tutor at Lady Margaret Hall.

When her father died, Grace returned home to look after her mother. During this period, which included the First World War, she was involved in a variety of initiatives to improve the status of women. When Cirencester WI was formed in 1916, she became the President, and in the same year she was elected to the NFWI executive committee and became its Vice Chairman, a post she was to hold until her death.

Grace's professional life continued alongside her work as Vice Chairman of NFWI. She was Secretary to Barnett House from 1920 to 1929 and Principal of the Society of Oxford Home Students from 1929 to 1940. This Society grew out of the Association for Education for Women, which was the origin of women members of the University. Women were first admitted to degrees in 1920 and the Delegacy for Oxford Home Students was constituted in 1921. During her ten years as Principal, Grace was able to move the OHS towards its later status as St Anne's College through the acquisition of land and the building of the library, which was opened in 1938.

Always concerned about life in rural areas, Grace assembled a group of people in Oxfordshire with similar concerns and this grew into the first Rural Community Council in the country. She also fought for the provision of public libraries for rural areas, travelling the countryside at the wheel of a snub-nosed Morris car named Andrew after Andrew Carnegie, whose trustees had supplied a grant for rural development.<sup>32</sup> As well as being Vice Chairman of NFWI, Grace was a member of the executive committee of the National Council for Social Services, of the BBC Advisory Council and of the adult education committee of the Board of Education. Her wide range of contacts was important in the developing educational work of the WI. She died of pneumonia in January 1940 at the age of 64.

### **A remarkable partnership**

The partnership of Trudie Denman and Grace Hadow, which lasted until Grace's death, provided the WI with exactly the balance that Adelaide Hoodless had spoken of when she said:

What must be done is to develop to the fullest extent the two great social forces, education and organisation, so as to secure for each individual the highest degree of advancement.<sup>33</sup>

Trudie Denman brought the 'great social force' of organisation and Grace Hadow the 'great social force' of education, and together they worked 'so as to secure for each individual' WI member 'the highest degree of advancement'.

And in doing this they fulfilled the objects of the WI, which had been laid down in the Constitution of 1919:

*The main purpose of the Women's Institute movement is to improve and develop conditions of rural life. It seeks to give all countrywomen the opportunity of working together through the Women's Institute organisation, and of putting into practice those ideals for which it stands. For the purpose of securing and furthering the said objectives the Women's Institutes shall have power to:*

*1. provide for the fuller education of countrywomen in citizenship, in public questions both national and international, in music, drama and other cultural*

*subjects, also to secure instruction and training in all branches of handicrafts, domestic science, health and social welfare.*<sup>34</sup>

### **Education in the WI 1919-39**

One of the great strengths of the WI was the way in which it crossed social boundaries and allowed women who had never before met on equal terms to do so. There was considerable difference between the lives of the ladies in the 'big house' and the women who served them. There was also a particular group of women to be found after a war that had resulted in the deaths of so many young men: 'surplus women'. The WI showed an awareness of and a sympathy towards their special needs.

The leaders of the WI had to plan an educational programme that would begin to address the needs of this wide range of women. One of the ways in which they did this was to concentrate on the newly acquired vote and to encourage all women to become active citizens. There was, alongside this education for citizenship, a very practical concern to try to improve the lives of members, especially those who had heavy domestic duties.

Lady Denman and Grace Hadow were remarkable women who influenced the way the educational purposes of the organisation developed. Both came from privileged backgrounds: one in society, with money, influence and all the right contacts, the other in academia, but also with wide-ranging interests and contacts. They both used their knowledge, influence and contacts in the interests of the new organisation. For Trudie Denman the main thrust was citizenship and agriculture; for Grace Hadow it was liberal education and widening the horizons of village women.

Under their guidance the National Executive Committee agreed the educational policy and set up programmes for its implementation. There were five main strands to the educational programme of the 1920s and 1930s: teaching members to run the new organisation; education in citizenship; practical instruction in domestic matters; revival of crafts; and liberal education.

### **Running the organisation**

Lady Albemarle, who succeeded Lady Denman as National Chairman, remembered:

*Lady Denman had always been very keen on the organisational side of things, that the business should be clearly and well run. The WI offered a very good training on how to run things, and I think she saw the WI as a training ground for women, so that when they went into public life they were aware and knew what they were doing and how to handle things . . . You see, countrywomen had not done an awful lot of public work. But when WI members went on to Rural District Councils, to a great extent they met the same procedures that they had already met in the WI, so they didn't feel out of their depth.*<sup>35</sup>

Lady Denman herself wrote pamphlets on how to carry out various roles: for example, *The Duties of WI Secretaries* and *Planning Work and Programmes*.

By 1921 every English county had its federation, though some of the Welsh and island federations were formed later. In order to ensure that all these federations were being run in a similar way, and that similar standards were being maintained, there were training conferences held in different parts of the

country, taken by Lady Denman herself assisted by one or two senior staff members from London.

### **Education in citizenship**

In a report written in 1919 the Ministry of Reconstruction stated that the committee believed that the 'economic recovery of the nation' and the 'proper use of their responsibilities by millions of new voters' (including women for the first time) depended on a more intelligent public opinion; therefore it concluded that 'adult education is a permanent national necessity, an inseparable aspect of citizenship' and that the opportunity for adult education should be spread uniformly and systematically over the whole community.<sup>36</sup>

The National Federation took this matter very seriously, and felt that it was important that it should inform members and encourage them to make use of their new power. One way was through articles in the WI magazine *Home and Country*, which they did while remaining within their non-party political boundaries:

*Many more women have the right to vote now than three years ago – the wives of men who are local government electors, as long as they are over 30 years of age, as well as those women over 21 years of age who are qualified in their own right as occupier, whether as owner or tenant . . .37*

*Proportional representation is in the air, and its adoption for practically all public elections in this country cannot be long delayed, for it is by its use public bodies can be made really representative of those who elect them . . .38*

### **Revival of handicrafts**

In order to revive practical rural skills, the Guild of Learners was set up in January 1920. It had the following aims:

- 1. To regain the practice of home handicrafts with a view to restore the best traditions of English workmanship.*
- 2. To assist in bringing the best instruction in handicrafts within the reach of villages.*

WI members were able to develop skills either through classes and tuition in the WI or by classes provided by the local education authority. East Sussex County Federation engaged a professional teacher in the craft of toy making. She visited many WIs using a bicycle bought by the Federation for £5.<sup>39</sup>

NFWI developed a series of 'proficiency tests' which a member had to complete to prove that she was competent at the appropriate craft before she could train as either an instructor, demonstrator or judge. Judges were required to judge WI competitions and county shows.

There were commercial possibilities. A memorandum setting out NFWI's reasons for claiming financial help from the government stated:

*the exodus from the country will not be checked until village industries are sufficiently well established to give employment to those women who are not able actively to devote themselves to agriculture proper but whose home duties do not take their whole time.<sup>40</sup>*

In 1918 a standing industries subcommittee was set up, and a 'lecturer on industries' was appointed to advise counties. The committee also administered the £1,000 grant that had been received from the Carnegie Trust for craft work. From this grant, loans were made to counties who wished to establish industries. *Home and Country* reported that Lindfield WI in Sussex 'has produced 1,900 toys during the year and one member has made £20 pocket money as the result of her share in the industry'. Another Sussex WI, Ticehurst, set up an industry in smocked dresses and jumpers for children, which were advertised in *The Lady* and traded well during the 1920s and 1930s. In *Home and Country* there are numerous accounts of other enterprises: in Warwickshire, for example, there was skin curing, fur craft and glove making, while in Devon there was dyeing, weaving and making socks.

### **Practical instruction in domestic matters**

The most popular subjects for most WI members were the practical ones which helped them to do their job better, whatever it might be: housewife, mother, smallholder, farmer.

There were speakers at the monthly meetings, and instructors and tutors who went to the village to run practical classes. In the early days, many of these classes were in how to 'make do and mend'. Photographs of the Scaynes Hill WI in Sussex show members learning tinkering in order to be able to mend their pots and pans, and being instructed in cobbling to enable them to mend their families' shoes. These were skills that most women had not had before; the instructors were men and they were teaching women what had previously been considered as 'man's work'.

Lady Denman particularly supported instruction on how to make the garden, the smallholding or the farm more productive. This part of the programme primarily provided the technical information required to grow produce, milk cows, keep poultry, etc, but skills related to the preparation of food in the kitchen and management of the house were also included.

The 1922 AGM resolved:

*That this meeting recommends the NFWI executive committee to represent to the government the great need for the continuance and development of adult education in rural districts and the possibilities of economy by using the assistance of voluntary societies in this work.<sup>41</sup>*

Because of her particular interest in this field, Lady Denman was in December 1925 asked by the government to chair a committee set up jointly under the Ministry of Agriculture and the Board of Education to 'consider the general question of the practical education of women for rural life'. The result was the Denman Report of 1928.

*Fundamental to the whole report was the concept that village women make a unique and twofold contribution to agriculture; the 'independent' contribution of women farmers and paid workers (of whom there were over 100,000 in 1926); and the 'co-operative' contribution made by a very much larger number of women and girls by virtue of their position as wives or daughters in village homes and where they have a far greater influence on the work of their menfolk than is the case in other industries. Practical education for women in rural life must therefore embrace not only the growing of produce in the field*

*and garden, but also its subsequent utilisation in the kitchen, and instruction in home management and crafts.*<sup>42</sup>

Following this report, the Ministry of Agriculture provided special grants to train teachers in farm household management, as well as appointing women inspectors to advise the county authorities on the education of women in agricultural subjects. By the end of 1930 the first rural home economists were trained.

The marketing of surplus food also gained in importance at this time of economic depression. In 1932 NFWI called a conference of all the Women's Institute Markets, which until that time had existed in isolation. There were about 20 of them and at that point they became registered as provident societies. The Carnegie Trust made a grant that enabled NFWI to employ a marketing organiser who was able to support the existing markets and promote the development of new ones. This was the beginning of the WI County Markets, now established as an independent unit.

### **Liberal education**

While reporting all this practical activity, *Home and Country* also warned:

*Whilst busy over classes for the provision of food and clothing and for the artistic decoration of the home, members of WIs will not forget there are other ways by which they may become good home makers besides purely practical means. The village has need of its Marys as well as its Marthas.*<sup>43</sup>

Music and drama became an important part of WI life. There were schools to train conductors of 'village singing' and folk dance classes. Plays and pageants were organised, and federations gave advice and ran schools on how to produce plays.

In the 1930s the Carnegie Trust gave a regular grant to help with the training of village producers and conductors. These grants were administered by the joint music and drama committee of NFWI and the National Council for Social Service (do we see the hand of Grace Hadow here?), and contributions were made to counties for their festivals. It was a way of maintaining an equal standard throughout the counties, but it was also allowing access to specialist training which WI members living in rural areas would not be likely to get in any other way.

In East Sussex, for example, Gertrude Lampson started a county choral festival. The first one was held in Lewes Town Hall with 11 WI choirs competing. This festival grew during the next 18 years into an event, the Lewes Music Festival, which covered six days, had over 2,000 competitors, and included classes for mixed choirs and children's choirs as well as soloists. To support this huge undertaking the County Federation also ran conductor's courses; these were held annually and by the time of the fifth one in 1928 there were 200 students attending and the course was taken by Dr (later Sir) Malcolm Sargent.<sup>44</sup>

### **Report of HM Inspectors**

In 1925 the Board of Education carried out an inspection of the 'Women's Rural Institutes and . . . the Educational Work carried on under the various County

Education Authorities in connection with them'. They published their report in the form of a White Paper.<sup>45</sup>

This report starts by noting the rapid growth of the WI: there were 3,328 WIs, all set up 'within the last 10 years'. It continues:

*the extension of educational activities amongst country women has steadily increased with the growth of the institute movement . . . Not all country women are ready to receive the more formal type of instruction usually given in towns. Home occupations often prevent their following a course of lessons; as do also inclement weather and seasonal events such as haymaking and fruit gathering. It is therefore often found more convenient to arrange short intensive courses in crafts and to rely for other educational expansion in single lectures, demonstrations and discussions; much of this work is aided by local education authorities . . . One of the important aspects of this work is that as a result of single demonstrations and lectures followed by discussions, regular though short courses have frequently been asked for. Women have not known before of all the interests of which by reason of the remoteness of the village they have been deprived. These needed to be brought to their doors to arouse attention, to cultivate the keen intelligence and interest which hitherto had lacked opportunity, and to give outlet to latent natural ability.*

*Country women do not naturally think quickly, they need time for reflection and for the application of the knowledge gained, but they know what they want and what is worth having. For example, Northumberland provided between 20 and 30 courses of instruction as the outcome of single lectures given in the previous year. In Staffordshire, 100 short courses were held in one year, largely as a result of the policy in the previous year of holding single demonstrations.*

### **National training programme**

The National Federation ran a centralised programme of training from the very beginning. At first, most of this training was for the leaders who were involved in running the organisation. In January 1922 there was the first recorded correspondence course:

#### *Correspondence Course in Economics*

*The course will be in the charge of Dr E.W. Shanahan, D.Sc.(Econ), M.A., of the London School of Economics, who will address a meeting of Institute organisers in London . . . on the subject of Economic Studies. Dr Shanahan prescribes a simple course of reading, so that students may prepare in advance for the correspondence course. The syllabus . . . under the heading of general economics deals with Wealth, Agents of Production, Markets, Values and Prices, Rent, Interest, Profits, Wages, Incomes, Money and Functions of Government.*

*Papers containing questions for written work and directions as to study will be sent every three weeks by Dr Shanahan [the set textbook cost 4/6 and the fee for the course was 10/6]*

*If this first course proves successful a second will be arranged, dealing more particularly with Agricultural Economics.*

This was a rather formidable programme and it is not clear how many actually followed it.

## Residential conferences

When WI members were delegates to conferences, or when they came to the AGM, they often had to travel considerable distances, and would also have to stay away from home overnight. For many of the women then – and today – this was a difficult thing to organise. But most women found that the value of coming together from all over the country was worth all the difficulties.

After such courses and conferences, the participants returned to their WIs and passed on what they had learned to their fellow members, providing a valuable source of education to women who lived in villages where, until that time, little had been available to them. The rate at which the WIs were formed and the membership increased shows clearly how the new organisation was welcomed.

Belonging to the WI increased the confidence of many women in their ability to run their own affairs. In 20 years the WIs had developed, sometimes in co-operation with other agencies, a well run educational service for women in the countryside.

## WI in wartime

In 1939, with the outbreak of a second world war, the WIs' efforts, yet again, had to be deflected from education for their own personal and community development towards helping once more with the war effort. Some WIs closed, but many more remained open. One of the Collins *Britain in Pictures* series was written by NFWI Education Organiser Cicely McCall, who told of the ways in which WI members coped with wartime. The illustrations show WI members making fur coats for Russia, running market stalls, using a mobile canning van given by the USA, fruit bottling, jam making, looking after evacuees and spinning wool gathered from the hedges. The book concludes by looking to the future:

*Institutes have taught countrywomen to be articulate, they have taught citizenship and they have revived forgotten crafts . . . the test time for the institutes is going to come after the war. Tired elderly members will have to make room for demobilised younger members, not to be replaced but to work alongside them.*<sup>46</sup>

At the same time they were looking forward to the end of the war.

NFWI urged its members to become involved with national planning:

*The war must be won, but so must the peace. The Government has recognised the need to think ahead and plan now. Women's Institutes have their contribution to give to the official planners.*<sup>47</sup>

WI members also considered what they wanted of the education system. In 1943 the government published its White Paper on educational reconstruction, which stressed the need to provide a proper training in democratic citizenship through adult education.

In September 1943 NFWI held a residential school at Radbrook College in Shrewsbury. The main speaker was Sir Richard Livingstone:

*He said that most electors of the next thirty years would have left school at 14. Yet the new Government proposals made no provision for adult education. Why*

*shouldn't WIs who had shown such remarkable common sense in their education questionnaires, fill that gap and provide a People's College? . . . later in the evening a recommendation was put to the meeting by a Herefordshire member that a WI People's College should be founded. This was carried unanimously.*

Thus the idea of setting up a WI College began to take root. At the AGM on 5 June 1945 the members voted to set up their own short-stay residential college. In 1947 the organisation bought Marcham Park (then in Berkshire) and on 24 September 1948 Sir Richard Livingstone opened Denman College – but that is another story.

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17. Ibid.
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20. *A Grain of Mustard Seed*.

21. The full name of the village is Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantsiliogogoch. The name is usually shortened to Llanfairpwll or Llanfair PG.

22. Report in the *North Wales Chronicle*, 18 June 1915; quoted in *A Grain of Mustard Seed*.

23. From the first minute book of Llanfairpwll WI; quoted in *A Grain of Mustard Seed*.

24. *A Grain of Mustard Seed*, p. 56.

25. From minute book of Llanfairpwll WI; quoted in *A Grain of Mustard Seed*.

26. Ibid.

27. *A Grain of Mustard Seed* has an appendix headed 'The story of the first WI Market in Great Britain and the important part it played in the foundation of the Navy, Army and Airforce Institute known as NAAFI'.

28. In 1971 there was a resolution changing the wording of the non-party political and non-sectarian rules. These now read:

*The character of the movement is non sectarian and non-party political, but in order to achieve the objects . . . this shall not be so interpreted as to prevent Women's Institutes from concerning themselves with matters of political and religious significance, provided the views of minorities are respected and provided that movement is never used for party political or sectarian purposes.* (NFWI Handbook, May 1972)

29. Ibid.

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#### **Other papers produced by the Society:**

- ▶ Spirit of Friendly Rivalry? Voluntary Societies and the Formation of Post-war Child Welfare Legislation  
Read
- ▶ Voluntary but not Amateur: Philanthropic Responses to Poverty 1847-1854  
Read
- ▶ The Origins of Flag Days  
Read
- ▶ The English University Settlements 1884-1939: A Social Movement Becalmed?  
Read

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