

## ROLE OF THE WOMEN'S INSTITUTE IN THE 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY.

### Women's Institute Background

The background of the Women's Institute is very relevant to its role in today's society. The WI movement actually began in Canada in 1897 with wives of members of the Farmers' Institute and the first British WI meeting took place in 1915 on Anglesey in North Wales. The Women's Institute was originally set up in the UK to revitalise rural communities and to encourage women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War.

### The Women's Institute – known for 'Jam and Jerusalem'

During the First World War Submarine blockades prevented food from being brought into the UK and it was imperative that as much food as possible should be grown at home.

The Board of Agriculture gave the challenge: 'We have to prevent hunger - every ounce of food which can be grown in this country must be grown, and every woman who can give a hand in this vastly important work must give a hand.' This was the war work for which WI members became renowned (and the 'jam' image has stuck ever since).

### Why are men not allowed to join the WI?

The WI is a women's institution because it began as such before women had the vote. Their men had jobs, clubs and pubs; the women had nowhere to meet, talk or help each other. Few women went out to work. The name 'Institute' was chosen because it was the women's branch of the Farmer's Institute - Institute being the term used for a permanent organization whose purpose was educational.

Once the Great 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 to break down the social barriers between countrywomen who had rarely met together in the past. Women had now received the vote (at least those over 30) and the National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) was anxious to encourage women to become active citizens.

Yet again, in the Second World War, WI members helped with food production. Between 1940 and 1945 more than 5,300 tons of fruit were preserved; that is, nearly 12 million pounds of fruit, which might otherwise have been wasted, provided food for the nation.

### Jerusalem

**1924** The song *Jerusalem* was first sung at the NFWI AGM, starting a tradition that continues to this day.

### Not many people realize the influence of the Women's Institute throughout the years with their Campaign History

Every year WI members have the chance to put forward issues or 'resolutions' that they would like the national body to campaign on. These resolutions go through a year-long debating and consultation process by the membership. Once the resolutions have been short-listed by the membership a select number are chosen for discussion at the summer AGM. If passed, these then become mandates and form the basis of campaigning activities in the years ahead. This process ensures that campaigns have been through a democratic process involving all members and come from the grassroots of the organization.

One of the first resolutions to be passed at the NFWI AGM in 1922 was to urge more public health education to prevent venereal disease. Over the years the WI has campaigned on a wide range of issues that matter to women and their communities, including Equal Pay in 1942, Breast Cancer Screening in 1975, Aids in 1986 and the introduction of new legislation to reduce the threat of hazardous chemicals in everyday products in 2006. Today our campaigns range from climate change and ending violence against women to the plight of the honey bee.

#### Names over the years ..... WI = Wild Indians .... WI = Wrinkly Ones .... Calendar Girls

The perception in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is of a lot of wrinkly old women drinking tea in the afternoon. However the WI membership in the UK is diverse with ages ranging from 19 to 90. Most will remember the impact of Calendar Girls and the film that followed (as well as the millions of pounds raised for charity). The aims of the organization have broadened in the last 95 years and the WI is now the largest women's organization in the UK with 6,500 WI's and over 205,000 members.

#### The WI in Great Chesterford

There has been a Women's Institute in Chesterford for almost 50 years. It is affiliated to the Cambridge Federation of Women's Institutes which itself has a wide programme of events that are available to local members throughout the year.

11 years ago the villages of Chesterford, Hinxton and Ickleton combined to form the local WI as it is today. There is a varied programme of speakers throughout the year and each meeting concludes with excellent refreshments! New members and visitors are always welcome.

#### The WI in the 21st century still has the same values as the WI in the early 20th century.

The WI is a diverse organisation open to women of all faiths, and there are WI's in towns, and cities, and villages throughout the British Isles. The women of the WI are young, old, single, married, widowed, with or without children. They discuss their work with male as well as female experts; they welcome men as guests to their meetings. There is no comparable men's organisation and no other women's organisation approaching WI membership.

A recent quote from the monthly magazine 'WI Life' – 'being a WI member is like belonging to a very large family'. How many other organizations give the opportunity of a multi generation network - a network traditionally provided by the extended family – but with today's greater mobility of the population this network may no longer exist for many families.

The WI in the 21st century plays a unique role in enabling women to gain fresh skills, take part in wide-ranging activities and campaign on issues that matter to them and their communities – and at the same time meeting new people and making new friends.