

The Women's Institute History

The WI movement began at Stoney Creek in Canada in 1897 when Adelaide Hoodless addressed a meeting for the wives of members of the Farmers' Institute. The first British WI meeting took place on 16 September 1915 at Llanfairpwll on Anglesey in North Wales.

The WI 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 National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) was formed in 1917 and the first resolution was passed at the AGM in 1918. It urged local authorities to take advantage of the government scheme for state aided housing.



1920s – 1930s

Once the war was over the newly formed WIs began to concentrate on working to improve the conditions of rural life and provide wider educational opportunities for members. Women over 30 had now received the vote and the WI encouraged women to become active citizens. Jerusalem was first sung at the AGM in 1924. By the 1930s the WI was firmly established and was often the subject of cartoons in Punch.

1940s

During the Second World War WIs again contributed an enormous amount to the nation by growing and preserving food, and helping to care for evacuees. In 1948 the NFWI opened an adult education centre called Denman College in Oxfordshire.

1950s

At the beginning of the decade the NFWI held a national music festival, and in 1952 staged a national craft exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The NFWI continued its campaigning work and helped set up the Keep Britain Tidy group.



1960s

The WI celebrated its Golden Jubilee in 1965 with a garden party – the Queen invited her fellow WI members to Buckingham Palace. The first national art exhibition was held and a special operatic sequence, *The Brilliant and Dark*, was commissioned.

1970s

Although many of the campaigns continued to focus on rural life, resolutions affecting wider issues were also passed. In 1974 the greatest number of WIs was ever recorded – over 9,000. The Diamond Jubilee in 1975 was celebrated with an exhibition entitled 'This Green and Pleasant Land?' reflecting members' concern about the future of the countryside.

1980s

The WI Life and Leisure Exhibition was held in Olympia, London. At the end of the 1980s the NFWI made its first appearance at the Chelsea Flower Show bringing great success. AGM resolutions were passed on issues such as embryo research, DNA testing, osteoporosis and AIDS.

1990s

The 90s opened with a 75th anniversary celebration – the Queen attended the AGM. The NFWI took the lead in a battle to retain adequate funding for adult education.

The WI today

The organisation continues to play a unique role in enabling women to gain new skills, take part in wide-ranging activities and campaign on issues that matter to them.

The WI is a diverse organisation open to all women, and there are now WIs in cities and towns as well as villages. Current campaigns include ending violence against women; reducing food waste and improving the environment for future generations.

Our residential college at Denman is seeing an increasing interest in its courses which include drawing for the terrified; breadmaking for beginners; handmade silk paper and calligraphy.

For more information on the WI please visit our website at www.theWI.org.uk or phone us on **020 7371 9300**.

