

The Women's Institute

The WI movement began at Stoney Creek in Canada in 1895 at a meeting for the wives of members of the Farmers' Institute. The first British WI meeting took place on the 16th September 1915 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.

One of its features was independence from political parties or institutions, or church or chapel, which encouraged activism by non-establishment women, which helps to explain why the WI has been reluctant to support anything that can be construed as war work, despite their wartime formation. In World War II, they limited their contribution to such activities as looking after evacuees and running the Government sponsored Preservation Centres where volunteers canned or made jam of excess produce. All this produce was sent to depots to be added to the rations.

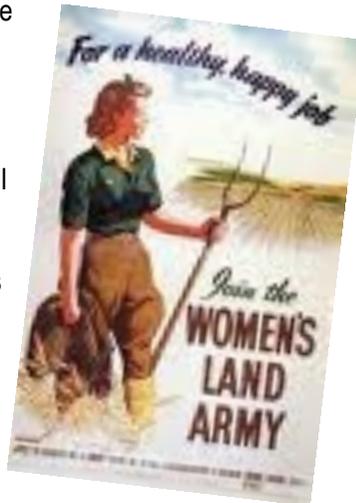
The Women's Land Army was set up in World War I and was responsible for averting famine after Germany successfully blockaded food imports to Britain. Lady Trudie Denman (of the fledgling Women's Institute) was appointed to organise the WLA and by 1916 there were 23,000 land girls at work milking, ploughing, herding and even thatching. The WLA was disbanded in 1919, but re-formed in the Second World War when it was recognised that Britain needed to grow more of its own food to avoid the near disaster of 1917. Lady Denman continued to champion the land girls of the second Women's Land Army, bringing about such innovations as a minimum wage and improved living conditions for them; although, even she was unable to secure adequate work for them once their wartime activities ceased and she resigned as Director of the WLA in protest in 1945.

In 1905, Lady Denman's father bought his daughter her own country estate, Balcombe, in Sussex. Balcombe Place (now a residential home for the elderly) was her home for the rest of her life.

The WI celebrated its 95th anniversary in 2010 and today plays a unique role in providing women with educational opportunities and the chance to build new skills, to take part in a wide variety of activities and to campaign on issues that matter to them and their communities. The WI is a diverse organisation open to all women and currently has approximately 205,000 members in 6,500 WIs.

There are now WIs in towns and cities as well as villages. Fairwarp WI is one of the oldest WIs and will celebrate its 90th birthday in 2011!

Angela H. Tilly (Fairwarp WI President)



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Extracts from Fairwarp WI Records of 1921



A meeting was held in the Village Hall Fairwarp on February 25th at 3pm to inaugurate a Women's Institute. In spite of a very wet afternoon there was quite a good attendance, about 30 being present. Mrs. Huddart gave an address after which it was unanimously decided to form a W.I. in Fairwarp. The meetings to be held in the Village Hall on the third Tuesday of every month at 3pm; the first to be on March 15th.

The following officers were then elected. President – Miss Barchard, Vice-President – Mrs. Ince, Treasurer – Mrs. Shakerly Ackers, Hon. Sec. – Miss S. Barchard.

Committee – Mrs. Anderson, Mrs. Burgess, Mrs. S. Cottingham, Mrs. Davis, Miss Nixon, Mrs. Swanwick.

March

The first monthly meeting was held on March 15th.

Mrs. Medlicolt Ross was the speaker. Gave an address on “Household Renovation and Repairs.”

An exhibition of needlework done by girls in the school was held – the chief feature of which was the renovation work. Tea was given by the Committee. 49 members were enrolled.

May

.....Mrs. Sharpe gave a lecture on “Poultry and Egg Production.” A Cake Competition was to have been held, but owing to the coal strike and difficulty of getting fuel only 3 cakes were brought. It was decided to postpone the competition until later in the year.

June

.....members were invited by Mrs. Barchard to Horsted Place on June 3rd. About 40 members were able to go. A motor lorry was hired to take those who did not drive or bicycle.....

August

.....An Exhibition of Garden Produce was to have been held, the exhibits to be sold for the benefit of the WI, but owing to the exceptional prolonged drought, nobody had anything to exhibit.....

Christmas Social

This was held in Fairwarp School. Proceeds began with tea at 4pm to which children taking part in the entertainment were invited. Then followed a song “Christmas Stockings” by the small children in nightgowns, and “The Goblin's Christmas Joke” – a Christmas play with songs and dances by the older children.

Angela H. Tilly
(Fairwarp WI President)

FAIRWARP WI: THE WAR YEARS. 1939-1944

It has been said that the WI didn't do much to help the War Effort in World War 2, so Fairwarp decided to find out what evidence there is to contradict this assumption.

The ancient records of meetings stored in the Lewes Record Office reveal a fascinating picture of life in these difficult years. It begins on 19 September 1939 when Lady Julian Parr urged WIs to carry on with their weekly meetings through the war. Members were asked to do mending for the evacuees, and there were talks on wartime cooking. There is mention of funding for the Infant Welfare Clinic, donations of £10 for the District Nursing Fund, and £2 cost for knitting wool "for comfort for the troops." (These sums do not sound impressive, but money has changed – note that a bill for a new boiler came to £4.17s. 6d!) So we know that members were knitting for the troops, socks etc. They moved meetings to the afternoons because of the poor light in the blackout.

In March 1941 food shortages hit hard and WI became part of the 'Food Economy Campaign.' Jam making produced 369lbs of jam that year, sold at retailers and making £3 profit. Jumble sales for funds were frequent, and a collection was made for gifts to be sent to men and women from Fairwarp currently serving in the forces. (Memo: in 2009 Fairwarp WI helped to send 700 Christmas parcels to Afghanistan.)



In 1942, Mrs. Kenward urged members to grow more vegetables for the coming year. Later, in June, Lady Denman was asking members to do voluntary work on the farms. No doubt members rallied. In the absence of most able bodied men women helped in farms, schools, hospitals, and became ambulance drivers, et al; and it is worth pointing out that members have always taken part in other caring services at the same time as good works within the WI. Not so long ago, a very old lady from Nutley WI revealed she had helped to run the British Restaurant in Uckfield, and Mrs. Kenward went back to full time teaching whilst still a member, although she gave up her committee work.

Despite falling membership, partly due to petrol rationing, Fairwarp carried on. Members picked umpteen pounds of rosehips for making syrup, raised enough funds to send a 6/- postal order and a Christmas card to each of the troops from the village. They even tried to "adopt" a minesweeper, an unbelievable promise to support a crew in one of the most horrendous areas of war, but it proved too difficult. A visitor spoke on "How to organise a compost heap." (What's new!)

So, maybe nowadays people only assume that the WI was not a useful part of the Home Front.

I think it certainly was.

THE SWINGING SIXTIES AND BEYOND.

The afternoon meetings to accommodate the blackout continued until 1958. Then the members experimentally alternated afternoons with evenings. The spirit of charitable work, however, continued. WI records of the sixties show that voluntary work was very much on the programme.

Beginning in 1960, 'Trading Shillings' were given out by the Treasurer in January, to be returned, with interest, in July. One year five shillings was sent to the Refugee Fund. A 'Derby and Joan' club in Paddington was 'adopted' and entertained annually. Records mention 68 visitors from London enjoying lunch in the Village Hall, then drives around the Forest in members' cars, and back for tea with homemade cakes and gifts of flowers and eggs for each visitor. The arrangement with Paddington continued until 1966 when the WI founded The Forest Club in Fairwarp. In addition to regular Charity work, sixties and seventies members held 'special effort' events, and as an example of this, £10 raised in 1961 enabled donations to be sent to the Blind and Cancer Campaign – after having reserved funds towards entertaining the Paddington folk.

Each year members picked primroses and sent them to the patients at The Royal Sussex County Hospital and The Sussex Eye Hospital. The WI also knitted blankets for 'needy folks', made scrapbooks for the Children's Hospital, had sewing groups to fundraise for Charities, held frequent Bring and Buy Sales and in 1965 began cooking lunch for the housebound – we still do this in Uckfield.

WI membership at the time was not all about work – fun was had too. One talk mentioned was entitled 'Why I like being Sixty'; competitions included 'Something made from an old hat' and 'Members' amusing stories about animals'. Hats were, of course, widely available as they were worn at meetings. It is also worth noting that in April 1963 two members of the committee had babies.

The educational side of the WI has always been important. Between the Sixties and the Eighties an impressively long list of classes was arranged: Basketry, Collage, Cooking, Country Dancing, Découpage, Dressmaking, Eiderdown and Loose Covers, Flower Arranging, Lampshade Making, Millinery, Painting, Patchwork, Raffia and String, Sweet Making, Tailoring, and necessarily, 'Keep Fit'. Discussion groups, outings to theatres, WI County Rallies and Group Meetings were frequent, as were attendances at National WI events.

A postal link with an Australian Institute was formed in 1961 and continued for some years. A second series of communications with an Australian WI happened in 1994.

In 1970 the Fairwarp 'Good Neighbours' scheme was started. It was a WI initiative, involving the Village and based on one already operating at West Hoathly. The scheme foundered after a while but was revived under the umbrella of the WI in 1980.

Fairwarp WI birthdays have always been well celebrated. Many were made memorable by the wonderful 'FWIDS' ('Fairwarp WI Dramatic Society' for non-members!) The 75th Anniversary was celebrated in 1996 with one such party and a service at Christ Church to mark the occasion. In the sixties the Institute put a seat on the South wall of the church in honour of the WI Jubilee. They also planted wild daffodils, three rowan and three cherry trees on the Village Green in 1996; and very recently, members and other village volunteers were seen with trowels planting more wild daffodils in the hope that there will be a pale golden haze edging the Green in time for Fairwarp WI's 90th Anniversary in March 2011.

E. Gutteridge.



FAIRWARP WOMEN'S INSTITUTE SNIPPETS

Fairwarpian WI members have distinguished themselves in one way or another, but there is not sufficient space to mention them all. Echo readers will recognise some of them and would probably have their own stories to add.

Amelia Martha Burgess (1872 – 1961). (From a history by R Burgess.)

Millie married Will Burgess in 1894. Will was the only son of John Burgess, wheelwright at Fairwarp. Millie became a teacher at Fairwarp School and later Head Teacher there – her work being regularly commended by the Teaching Inspectorate. The Burgesses took a major interest in village affairs. Will was keen on bowls (and on the Foresters Arms!), and Millie supported the Bridge Group, and was a Founder Member of Fairwarp Women's Institute. When the Village Hall was built in 1925, there was some friction in the Burgess household. Millie wanted it to become the venue for the Bridge Club; but, Will wanted to reserve it for bowls and snooker. Millie had her way and the men were consigned to the back room. Early in the 1930s, Millie retired from the school and handed over to Miss Picton for whom they built Moorland Cottage. During the building, the Water Authority discovered the serious problem of fouled water in the village, which had claimed many young lives earlier in the century, and proceeded to lay new pipes for which they charged. The cost was so high that the Burgesses had to sell two of the cottages they owned, and finally had to leave Inglenook (now Regency Cottage), which John Burgess had built, and they moved to Portslade.

Jean Gorringe. Memories.

At the age of 13 I played for the junior stoolball team, and the senior side when I was 15. I also played for the North Division side as well as the Sussex team against Kent.

Often on a summer Sunday night the Silver

Band would play outside the Foresters Arms. Once a week Fred Tester would show films at the village hall. These included Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, Tarzan and King Kong. There were socials and dances in the village - often with live bands. Whist drives were popular.

Frank and I got engaged in 1959 and were married in Fairwarp Church in 1961. We have lived in Jasmine since 1964. I started helping Mr. Macmillan in the shop in 1968/9 and continued working there when the shop was sold to the Sucklings – in total about 30 years.

Caryl Suckling & the Village Shop & Post Office.

Caryl and Norman Suckling will long be remembered for their generosity and kindness in the community. Customers at the Village Shop (now the Old Post Office) had monthly accounts with weekly deliveries at no extra cost. Try to get that kind of service today. Caryl saved up new first day covers and special edition stamps for collectors, and collected the payment 'as and when.' She took in parcel post for those villagers who were away from home during the day, and for many years allowed the visiting chiropodist to use her private home for villagers to have their feet attended to. Norman died after a long illness while living in Fairwarp. Caryl soldiered on bravely in the shop for several years; and sadly died suddenly soon after finally retiring and moving to Uckfield.

Margaret Ridley (née Coleman). Memories of Village Life.

I went to Fairwarp School and was involved in the Church and Sunday School and choir. The Headmistress was Miss Picton, and Infant Teachers were Mrs. Appleby who was lovely, and Miss Watman, who for no reason used to hit us across our knuckles with the ruler. Miss Picton used to put the fear of God into me. I joined the stoolball team at the age of eleven, and we practised behind the school on the forest. I met my husband David playing stoolball, and in March we will be celebrating our Golden Wedding.

My sister Maureen (now Maureen Chewter) and I used to have to carry the accumulator to Lampool to be charged up, so we could listen to the radio. In 1958 we had our first TV, which was a 12" in a cabinet. All the children along the lane used to come and watch.

Mother was rushing around one day to get us ready for school. I was playing in the playground and wondered what was dropping down! It was my night-gown which was under a wool vest and a bodice!

Dear Mrs. Ann Sainsbury did an awful lot for the local children. The village fete was held in Captain Lingford's house. Peggy Thorby (nee Pope) used to put on the pantomimes. I was a fairy! (Still a fairy!) My sister was a rabbit. Arthur Dadswell who lived in Forge Cottage used to organise the coach outings to the seaside, which was wonderful. All villages used to mix in for the bonfires and fancy dress. Cophall Farm had a little theatre for village shows, and we had live bands in the village hall in 1951.

Ann Sainsbury.

I joined the Fairwarp WI in the spring of 1962 when Mrs. Nancy McNair was President. The meeting was held at Mrs. Hunt's house (now the Vicarage). Mrs. Hunt was the mother of the racing driver. At the next AGM, I found myself on the committee and later took over as Treasurer for 6 years from Clarice Johnson. I became President in 1971 taking over from Jean Gent, and after 3 years handed over to Mrs. Pretty.

I took part in the County play "A Boy with a Cart" by Christopher Fry and we performed at The Dome in Brighton for 3 days.

I learned how to do Danish tapestry, cookery, découpage and upholstery. Later, we had fun composing and embroidering the present tablecloth, the previous one having been printed with lino-cut in rather dull greens and browns. We entered the County competition at Ardingly every year.

When I first joined nearly all the residents of Duddleswell and Putlands, including

members of the first committee were active members.

Jane Rattray.

In the mid 1970s I opened an antique shop in Fairwarp Village (Dunluce now York Cottage). I sold pine furniture, china, treen and old tools. I stripped the pine, repaired and polished it before it went into the shop. Every Monday in the early hours of the morning I drove to London. I had a stall in the old Covent Garden market where I bought and sold antiques. I sold the shop in the summer of 1986, and moved to Broom Cottage with my three boys. I ran a B&B from there for the next eighteen years. Now I have retired to a little house at the bottom of my garden, which is very nice and peaceful.

Myrtle Wade. (1925 – 2005.)

Contributed by Ann Barnes.

Myrtle lived for a long time in Fairwarp and was blessed with many skills and a charmingly gentle personality. She was very artistic and painted the forest view, which for over twenty years has covered one end of the village hall. She also contributed to the Millennium map of our village, which is situated on the wall nearby in the village hall. The Fairwarp Echo cover sketch was also designed by her.

Myrtle's other dedication was the Children's Church which she ran for many years until she became ill. Although the vestry space was small there were always children enjoying her creative ideas based on Christian principles for part of the service. In the summer she also hosted several Teddy Bears' Picnics in the garden of Romany Cottage for the younger members of the community.

Fairwarp WI have her to thank especially for the design of the embroidered table-cloth which shows The Street on the front panel and forest flora and fauna on the sides. In 1996 all members of the group completed some part of it. It was exhibited at the Ardingly Show and still takes pride of place on our main table each month at WI meetings.

JAM AND JERUSALEM

In the past, many WIs could accommodate their younger members by having daytime meetings, thus solving the problem of finding baby-sitters. Membership has declined in recent years due to the fact that many women now work during the day. Another reason for this decline is that of image. The Women's Institute has long been the butt (rather unfairly) of sexist jokes about the blue rinse brigades of 'County ladies' and do-gooders wearing hats, twin-sets and pearls, who had nothing better to do than tell us how to organise our lives. The recent BBC series Jam and Jerusalem (now axed) did nothing to improve that image. There have been many suggestions towards altering the Women's Institute title to Women Involved or Women Inspired. The Jury is still out on that one! Gone are the days when most WIs sing Jerusalem and/or The National Anthem at *every* meeting! The WI continues to be a diverse organisation, open to all women, with currently approximately 205,000 members in 6,500 WIs. It is still independent of religious doctrine and party politics, as Tony Blair found out when he extended the boundaries of his brief at the WI's Triennial Meeting at Wembley on 7 June 2000 and 'snuck in' a bit of Labour Policy. Who will ever forget the scenes on TV News, when the members gave him the 'slow handclap?'

There are many reasons why Fairwarp WI has been going for 90 years. Here are some of them:

- Good company, interesting and varied meetings, super refreshments, lots of laughs and a sense of belonging to a lively community. We enjoy life to the full!
- We value the part each member plays in whatever capacity and the role of the organisation within the greater community.
- Spouses, partners and friends also have a role and men are often invited to our meetings.

Not a WI person? Neither are the rest of us. How many WIs do you know with a wine cellar and an entertainment fund under the bed? (Only we know whose bed.) We really do have a lot of fun. No talks on the history of broccoli and you won't be obliged to take your clothes off – unless you want to. Activities include a reading group, a supper club, theatre visits and a film club. Membership is growing and we have attracted several younger members. If you feel your life could do with a bit of pizzazz then come and join us as we celebrate our 90th Anniversary.

We don't often sing Jerusalem, but when we do, we tune the piano, raise the roof and celebrate! But some of us do make extremely good jam!

Angela H. Tilly and Tracy E. Atchison.